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OR,

## OLD HALCYON,

The Stranger Within the Gates.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,  
AUTHOR OF "OLD '49," "MONTE JIM," ETC.

### CHAPTER I.

#### A PILGRIM'S RECEPTION.

As a rule, those sportively inclined could pretty safely count on having their wants supplied by dropping in at Sabara's well-known resort, the "Good Times" Saloon. Not that it was an unusually rough or tough dive, viewed from a mining-camp standpoint, for any such assertion would be gravely wronging Harry Trefoil, sole owner and manager.

"Have your fun, gentlemen," he was wont to say, with characteristic gravity in face and in voice. "Amuse yourselves as it likes ye, just so you step up to the captain's office to settle when the bell rings. If not—well, I can call with the

"THAR! I DARE THE SECRET SIX TO DO THA'R DOUBLE-WU'ST! I SPIT ON THA'R  
WARNIN'!" OLD HALCYON CRIED.



bill, but the same man never asked me to call a second time."

There was no need to elaborate. All Sahara, and a goodly portion of the mining country 'round about, knew Harry Trefoil—the sport who dressed and looked so much like a dyspeptic undertaker, or melancholy mute.

At rare intervals Trefoil was known to smile, but as those smiles came only when he was engaged in a fight for life or death, his patrons soon learned to look upon his long, thin face as a sort of barometer: as long as that habitual gloom remained unbroken, they felt safe to "carry on" under full sail; but let even the ghost of a smile come to face or to eyes, and the warning was hastily given of breakers ahead.

On this particular evening, then, "the boys" were bent on enjoying themselves after their own fashion, with a little variation introduced by one of their number.

"Circus" Cook began it.

Being a general favorite, the ex-professor of the sawdust arena had scarcely entered the Good Times before he was invited to drink, and just as promptly accepted said invitation.

Instead of draining the dram at a gulp, after the ordinary fashion, Circus Cook produced a half-pint flask, into which he decanted the amber-hued poison, a twinkle of merriment in his shrewd face as he glanced around before saying:

"What's the use in being a hog, simply because it's easy to grunt? Wouldn't even a porker enjoy it better if he could take his swill to sweet music? Yet here we all are, white men and gentlemen, every man-jack of us, running for the trough when the bucket tips, thinking only of getting on the outside of the brew by the shortest route.

"That's hoggish, gentlemen. But this—combines art with pleasure—and here you have—a new wrinkle!"

While speaking thus, Circus Cook bent his head backward until he could balance the half-pint flask on his forehead, the uncorked neck pointing toward the painted ceiling of the saloon. Then, with a swift, deft movement, he caused the bottle to tip forward, catching the neck between his teeth, holding it thus until the whisky gurgled into his mouth and down his well-seasoned throat.

That was the beginning of the sport, and the "new wrinkle" took with the sport-loving crowd.

Some tried the initial trick, with more amusement for the spectators than success for themselves, but others showed greater originality, and at length every man in that portion of the spacious frame building was trying to devise a new method of drinking.

Harry Trefoil came from beyond the curtain-draped archway which divided the saloon proper from that portion devoted solely to the goddess of fortune, drawn thither by the unusual noise; but he paused barely long enough to make sure it was all in good-nature, then backed off like some dyspeptic ghost of melancholy run mad.

Possibly Circus Cook had been studying the matter up before springing it upon the Good Times, or it may have been owing to his professional training, through which he had attained a suppleness proof as yet against increasing years and much bad whisky; but he alone covered himself with glory at each fresh feat, while the others furnished the laughing material, by taking most of their whisky outwardly, mixed with a fair share of the yellow sand with which the saloon floor was thickly sprinkled.

"It's easy enough when you know how, gentlemen," quoth he, placing the replenished flask upright on the floor, then motioning for a clear field in which to operate once more. "You supply the poison, and I'll do the rest."

He chuckled shrewdly as he spoke, but what matter? If he was getting free drinks, wasn't he repaying all hands in fun?

Standing on his hands, one planted on each side of the flask, Cook lowered his body until his teeth could grip the neck of the bottle, then he "flopped over," taking the flask with him, instantly throwing somersets, at each revolution lowering the contents of the bottle.

At the end, he threw more power into his limbs, rising high in air, to finish with a double somerset.

His feet brushed the ceiling, and a cry of warning broke from the spectators as it seemed likely he would strike against the top of the door-casing, either through a miscalculation caused by too much drink, or with a desire to make a dramatic exit.

But as he turned over for the second time, a man started to enter the saloon, and Circus Cook alighted fairly astride his shoulders!

Almost any man would have fallen beneath that heavy shock, but not so the stranger.

Evidently he caught sight of that revolving shape, for he turned quickly about, as though to beat a retreat for safer quarters, but as Circus Cook came down, muscular hands grasped each leg; then the new-comer wheeled again, pausing just inside the doorway, to almost meekly ask those within:

"What shall I do with him, gents?"

Evidently Circus Cook was more surprised than even the stranger, but he held fast to the empty flask with his teeth through all, and drop-

ping both hands to that head as a fulcrum, shot himself nimbly into the center of the room, before freeing his mouth to say:

"Every drop gone where 'twill do the most good, and—who called you for the brother act, stranger?" turning abruptly, to scowl blackly upon the embarrassed new-comer.

"Didn't I ought to, sir?" meekly asked the stranger, taking off his time-worn hat, holding it before his broad breast with nervously fumbling fingers. "When I see'd ye comin' that-a-way, legs a-spraddle, like ye wanted my cabeza fer a hitchin-post, why I jest— Beg pardon, sir, ef I've played the fool ag'in."

The stranger forced a feeble smile as he encountered that keen, steady stare, then bowed apologetically as he glanced meekly around the room, heaving a long sigh the while.

Circus Cook dropped a hand heavily upon his shoulder, forcing his eyes to turn again, then bluntly demanded:

"Who are you, cully? What show did you run with last?"

"Deed, sir, I never—"

"What? Don't tell me you never wore the spangles, after giving me the shoulder like that! You're no Jay, but—hey, Rube!"

The old rallying cry rung forth sharply; the slogan which never a habitant of the white tents heard unmoved; but the test failed, for that meekly perplexed look only grew more pronounced, and the fellow huskily mumbled:

"Tain't Rube nobody, sir, but jest Old Halcyon, the Never-endin' Tramp. Tramp, beca'se I'm too poor fer ridin'; Never-endin', beca'se I can't stop ontel I find my other half; an' Halcyon, fer the reason why, I've larned through long-sufferin' an' tribulations to take things pritty much as they come my way; smilin' at the kicks, an' pertendin' I like 'em when I don't, doin' in Rome as the rum-'uns do, so to speak."

Circus Cook fell back, balked, yet far from satisfied that he had been mistaken in his first surmise.

Old Halcyon, as he called himself, turned a wistful gaze upon each of the others in turn. Back of his outward meekness might have been detected a smothered fire, as though only long training in the schools of bitter adversity had taught him self-control to such a remarkable degree.

Then, in low, almost quavering tones, he asked:

"Mebbe some one o' ye kin tell me, gents? Mebbe some o' ye know whar I kin find a man named Philo Dobbs? Don't speak in too big a rush, I beg o' ye, fer thar's a mighty heap 'pendin' on my findin' him, an' ef 'tain't to be hyar in Sahary, then I've come turribly nigh to the last end o' my rope!"

"Philo Dobbs? Horse-thief, wasn't he, pardner?"

"That's your joke, sir, an' I'm passin' of it by, long of the pore ole mother who's waitin' in tears an' sorrow fer one boy to fetch her t'other son back; an' him a twin' the youngest by 'most a hafe-hour! An' him never a-knowin' how much 'pends onto his bein' found! An' me—ef ye mought jest tell me, gents, why, 'pears like I'd never git over thankin' ye in time to git the chores done up afore next Christmas Eve!"

Old Halcyon forced a smile, and even sought to give his voice a touch of jocularity, but with poor success. So pitifully pathetic did he seem, just then, that more than one ready jest was suffered to die unborn. But all were not so tender-hearted, and from lip to lip ran quip and quirk, joke and mockery.

The sports were in a fun-thirsty mood, this evening, and fancying they saw in this stranger a fit subject for their amusement, the wink was passed along, and the hint quickly taken up by Circus Cook.

"A stranger, eh? That goes without saying, since you presume to ask a citizen of Sahara for information, without first being regularly introduced. Now, take your choice; pull-foot, or be initiated!"

"Which?" hesitatingly asked Old Halcyon, clearly puzzled.

"You must be initiated according to rule, or skin out in a hurry. This is Sahara, the Second. Always dry, always ready to drink. That's Sahara, and her citizens are just the same way, whether native or adopted, old-timers or new-comers.

"But we have our rules and regulations, of course, and he who is foolish enough to ignore or disobey them, generally pays the penalty; and climbs a tree by the rope-route.

"You come here to Sahara. Of course you are invited to drink. If you guzzle like a hog, or other animal, we've no use for you, unless to ornament a tree. We demand originality, or nothing!"

Old Halcyon listened to this rapidly delivered speech with the deepest interest, but with a puzzled expression stealing into his face.

"I'm hearin' what ye talk, neighbor, but hope may die ef I kin make out jest what ye mean," almost timidly ventured Old Halcyon, at the same time edging toward the front door; only to stop short as several of the sports barred his passage, with grins upon their faces.

Ever ready for a free drink, Circus Cook tossed his little flask to the man back of the bar for

a fresh supply, then proceeded to illustrate his meaning by giving an act of contortion which, no matter how easily performed by one in steady training and appropriate garb, was more than creditable to one so long out of harness as himself.

Scraping away the sand so that the flask might stand firmly, Cook crossed arms over his chest, slowly bending over backward until his head came down between his legs, with eyes looking in the same direction as his toes pointed. Grasping the neck of the flask between his teeth, he slowly reversed his movements, swallowing the dram as he rose upright once more.

Through all, Old Halcyon watched closely, a ray of comprehension lighting up his grave, almost melancholly visage as Circus Cook said:

"An easy one, of course, since 'twas merely meant as an example, to save 'chin-music, but I reckon 'twill serve; if not to point a moral, at least to adorn a tale. One more dose, please, pardner!" passing the flask across the bar, with a wink at the attendant.

"Oh, if that's all—" began Old Halcyon, to be cut short by the ex-gymnast as the flask was pressed upon him, with the words:

"Chin-music below par, pardner. Show us your specialty, and remember it depends on yourself whether we call in the brass band or the coroner's jury. Originality will save, but base imitation will surely condemn you to eternal—ahem!"

During this speech of warning, Old Halcyon was smelling of the uncorked flask; then, as if to make the test perfect, he gingerly touched tongue to contents, smacking his lips in approval as the bottle lowered again.

"Smells like it, tastes that way, an' I do reckon it's the pure quill," he declared, a smile actually appearing upon his grave countenance. "An' so you want—all right, sir! Long time since, I made up the mind o' me fer to do in Rome as the rum-'uns does. Ef I knowed jest what— Couldn't show the old man which, neighbor?"

Circus Cook flashed another doubting look into that face, then placed two wooden-bottom chairs in the center of the room, only a short distance apart, resting a hand upon each as he nimbly elevated his legs and body, supported by his arms alone.

Turning over, striking on his feet, he came back to take the flask from Old Halcyon, speaking as he put the utensil in position:

"If it's too hard for you, Reuben, blame yourself for callin' on me as a sampler. There you have them: two chairs as a bridge to glory, the Fairy Honey-dew imprisoned within her crystal palace, just burning to reward her noble rescuer from—so to speak!"

A malicious chuckle tangled up his glib tongue, and Circus Cook stepped aside with a hand-wave toward the arrangement, leaving Old Halcyon thoughtfully combing his luxuriant beard with dingy fingers as he took notes.

"Looks kind o' ticklish fer a critter whose ole j'int's hes lost power o' thar soopile, but ef— 'Tis the law o' the town, then?"

"It's do or be done for, uncle," declared Circus Cook, soberly.

"Then I'll tackle the job, ef it breaks me wide open!"

Old Halcyon first tested the stability of the chairs by bearing heavily upon them, evidently suspecting a hidden joke in that direction; but when fairly satisfied on that point, he lost little further time.

Removing his ragged coat, he pulled his hat tightly upon his head, spat upon each hand to prevent an untimely slipping, then measured his distance and awkwardly kicked up his heels.

The first effort failed, but his next attempt was more successful, and though he apparently found it difficult to maintain his balance, Old Halcyon not only did that, but found breath to mumble:

"Sort o' creaky in the j'int's, 'long o' rheumatics, but time was when the ole man could—an' when in Rome—stiddy by jerks, now!"

Little by little Old Halcyon was lowering his body, each inch adding to the heavy strain upon his arm-muscles, already greater than any save a practical gymnast could realize.

His face was on a level with the chair-bottoms. It sunk lower and lower, his lips protruding, his eyes straining, until his teeth closed fairly about the neck of the flask!

Then, with a swift rising and turn, Old Halcyon stood erect upon his feet, flask bottom-upward and draining itself.

At that instant there came a bright flash, and the bottle flew into fragments before that ugly missile!

## CHAPTER II.

### OLD HALCYON, THE WANDERER.

BREAKING the flask to bits with its metal-bound hilt, the glittering knife sped on, to stick deeply into the wooden wall beyond.

There came a startled chorus from the crowd of on-lookers, but Old Halcyon betrayed very little emotion, one way or the other.

He spat out the neck of the ruined flask, brushing the bits of glass and drops of liquor from



face and beard, casting a grave, serious glance around before speaking:

"That's all right, ef 'tis right, gents. I'm a pilgrim an' a stranger hyar, an' I'm axin' nothin' better'n to live up to the rules an' regulations made an' pervided fer all sich. But—an' you kin spell it with a big bumble-bee, gents. But, I say, ag'in, ef that was meant fer a slur or a insult, I'm gwine to pay it back."

"After what fashion, Reuben?" asked Circus Cook, blandly.

"Cordin' to the rules an' regulations o' the town, be sure," came the prompt reply. "When I'm in Rome, I do as the rum-uns do."

"And you'd fight rather than swallow an insult?"

"That's no lie, neither, neighbor. Mebbe I hain't so much fer pritty, an' mebbe I hain't ary bit better'n I look to be, but when it comes to rubbin' the spit in—waal, I don't reckon you kin p'int out the law as says a pilgrim an' a stranger hes got to knuckle down so p'izen low as all that comes to?"

"But if 'twas merely part and parcel of the initiation?"

"Then that's all right. I kin grunt with the hogs, or I kin grin 'long with the rest o' the monkeys, jest a'cordin'. Folks hev called me a odd fish, but I was born that way, an' whether this yer' trick says git mad or stay easy, it's all one to Old Halcyon."

"You look as though you really mean it, too!"

"Why wouldn't I, then?" equably asked the stranger, his shaggy brows arching for the moment. "It all comes in the day's work. 'Course I'd a leetle rather eat then fight, but everythin' goes 'cordin' to law an' custom. An' so—Which shell it be, knife-pitcher?"

His still, keen eyes flashed around the group, searching for the one who had cut his initiation short, and a slender, dandyish-seeming sport stepped forward, with ready hand and pleasant smile, saying:

"'Twas my doing, pardner, but I meekly ask your pardon for it."

Old Halcyon partly lifted his hand, but then paused, with a doubting glance toward Circus Cook, whom he evidently regarded as a sort of master of ceremonies.

"Ef I was better posted, ye see! Kin I, sir? 'Cordin' to rule, which ought it to be: shake, or dickin'?"

"Shake, of course," laughingly replied the gymnast. "Tony was only putting the cap-sheaf on, to complete your initiation."

"Shake goes, then, an' I'm mighty glad of it," gravely declared the stranger, his eyes passing critically up and down that almost foppishly garbed figure. "'Twould be a mighty pity fer to rumple them clothes a-usin' of tha'r in'ards to mop up the floor with; now, wouldn't it?"

"Of course you could do all that, pardner," smilingly bowed the dandy sport, as he "winked the other eye" at his mates. "How many full-grown men makes your regular breakfast, by the way?"

"'Cordin' to the place I ketch myself at, sir. Rules is rules, an' I'd never 'a' got this many gray ha'rs ef I hedn't l'arned how to fit myself into eyther a round hole or a squar', 'cordin' to circumstances as I found 'em."

"A philosopher in rags!" laughingly exclaimed Circus Cook, joining arms with the stranger and moving up to the bar. "We picked him up for a flat, but I reckon he's nearer a sharp! The joke's on me, boys, and you can nominate your particular delight at my expense."

"'Nother 'nitiation, eh?" shrewdly asked Old Halcyon, plainly upon the keen alert.

"No. You're free of the town from this henceforward, so far as our gang goes. But, I say!"

"Which?"

"You're an old hand at the bellows, surely! Only a professional could have performed that turn without stripping to it. Why not own up to the truth?"

"Whatever I do own to, you kin be sure it's the truth, sir," soberly said Old Halcyon, putting down his untasted dram, brushing one hand lightly across his troubled face before adding: "I never was nearder bein' a professional then the one time I tried to ride the trick mule, as a boy: that cost me the hull seat o' my trowser-loons, an' I needed that kiverin' peskily, when I got back home, fer mother to see."

His voice caught a quaver as he uttered that title, and once more his eyes imploringly sought the faces of his smiling companions.

"An' that mother, gents. Nigh onto eighty. Pore, weak, broken down in body an' sperit, kep' alive only by hopin' an' prayin'—fer what?"

"That the pitiful Lord'll let her live ontel the home-comin' o' her youngest son! Which his name is Philo Dobbs. My other half, gents. Younger'n me, by pritty nigh bafe an hour. Twins, so to speak. Him called Philo, an' me called Milo. Both of us Dobbs."

Once more he paused to glance around like one hoping against hope for a reassuring smile. Smiles there were in plenty, but none which could carry the assurance he sought.

"Will wonders never cease?" drawlingly exclaimed Tony Anderson, his beringed hands flyin' up in mock amazement. Two of a kind?

And such a kind, too! Angels and ministers of grace, get out!"

"Cheese it, cully," reproved Circus Cook, with a warning glance. "Can't you see our new friend is wrestling with his grief, and standing in sore need of sympathy? Twins, you say, Reuben?"

"Twins fer sure, sir, as ye kin read it writ' down in the big Bible to hum, ef ye think to drap in as ye happen that way. Milo the fu'st, Philo the second, 'long of its happenin' that way o' comin'. 'Pears like thar must 'a' bin a mistake made in that, lookin' at it from this long-furs-back."

"Philo was the prittiest fer looks, an' a heap sight the smartest in ary way ye happened to ketch him. Me—I was jest ordinary, so to speak. But Philo—lawsee! ef ever two sech should happen to be at the same time, I do reckon thar'd hev to be a 'dition built on to make this airth big enough fer the holdin' of 'em both!"

"A natural phenomenon, eh?"

"Ef that means ary thing smarter, brighter, snappier then the common run o' human truck, I reckon Philo was that!" declared Old Halcyon, with mild enthusiasm in voice and in face. "Which is part o' why I say he'd ought to bin fu'st-born, by rights, 'stead o' jest me."

"I could make ye all see jest why I'm feelin' that way, ef the night was a month long, but sence she hain't, why—Waal, I don't reckon ary one o' ye kin tell me whar I mought find my other half?"

"Hardly in Sahara, for such a blazing light couldn't hide itself, even under a bushel basket," declared Circus Cook, adding: "But why are you so anxious to find the fellow, pardner? If I had a brother who laid over me so far as you say, seems like I'd rather keep him lost."

"You shorely never was a twin, then?"

"No. For there was only smartness enough to supply one of me. And then, you see, I never had either father or mother: just sprouted up out of the sawdust."

Old Halcyon nodded gravely, unmoved by the witticism which drew a laugh from those nearest Tony Anderson, at Cook's expense.

"I knowed it, sir, when I see ye grinnin' 'long o' my mentionin' the old mother who's still a-waitin' an' a-hopin' an' a-prayin' fer her stray sheep to come back to the fold o' her dyin' arms."

"Then it isn't a sell you're trying to get off on us, pardner?"

"Which?"

"You're really searching for a missing brother?"

"Fer my other half, yes, sir," meekly bowed the stranger. "Which he racked out, one day 'twixt sundown an' sun-up, jest leaving word abind him as he'd never come back ontel he could be fu'st toad in the home-puddle."

"Twins though we was, thar was a bigger difference atwixt us two then in good-looks an' humbliness. Me, bein' the oldest, was cool an' ca'm, so to speak. Philo, he was hot as a pepper-pot jest off the fire. I was go-easy, he was come-hard. An' so things kept gittin' more crooked an' wuss then ever."

"Mother stuck by Philo, while pap kind o' bung over to my side o' the fence. 'Long of his bein' more my kind, by natur', I reckon: cool an' ca'm an' slow-goin', ye know."

"Then, that day, Philo kicked clean over the traces, an' eended up by flaxin' the ole gentleman, fit to kill! Jest licked him black, an' blue, an' green, an' yellor, ye understand?"

"Philo jumped on our best boss, an' pulled foot fer healthier quarters, sendin' back word that ef ever he come back, 'twould be to play cock o' the walk."

"An' from that day to this, none o' the fambly hes ever set eyes onto the lad—lawsee! 'Twas lad, then, but now—waal, he's like me, huggin' the last o' his fifties!"

"And you're out this way hunting for him, you say?"

"Which I'm comin' to that part of it, sir," soberly added the new-comer, combing his thick beard with unsteady fingers. "It's bin a turrible weary waitin' spell, as ye kin count up, ef ye come to think: an' thar's jest his mother, now, waitin' on the alidge o' her grave, so to speak, longin' to see her lost boy afore dyin' clean out."

"An' so—waal, mother axed me wouldn't I find her baby; she never hed no more, a'ter us twins, ye see, gents."

"An' I said I'd do my level, ef it tuck a hundred year. An' I sot out to lookin', axin' ever' whar I went fer news o' Philo Dobbs, an' when thar didn't nobody 'pear to know o' ary sech, I come to other names which I picked up a'ter my twin flung 'em off; 'mongst 'em Adelbert Fitzroy, Montague Stuart, Augustus Le Grand."

"Never hear tell o' ary sech, nuther, gents?" he added, with poorly disguised eagerness, eyes roving swiftly from face to face.

"One Fitzroy was hung over at Celestial City, for liftin' a horse that didn't belong to him; could that have been your brother?" Tony Anderson asked, solicitously.

Old Halcyon shook his head, earnestly.

"Not ef he was hung dead, sir. Mebbe you don't know jest how that kin be, never havin' a twin, yourself, but Philo is livin'. Ef he was dead, I'd shorely hev knowed it when the airthly

ties was cut in two. An' none o' you gents kin tell me, then?"

A general negative was given. By this time the simple earnestness displayed by the wanderer was taking effect, and from scoffing, the sports began to feel a growing sympathy.

Even Circus Cook betrayed something of this as he asked:

"What made you think to find your twin here at Sahara, pardner? Did you have any regular clew to follow?"

"I wish't I hed, but that'd be a lie ef I was to say it," gloomily answered Old Halcyon. "It's bin nigh three year now sence I lost the latest clew, as you call it. An' then—it comes mighty hard to say the likes, but truth is truth, an' so—I reckon Philo went to the bad, as ye might call it."

"He al'ays was a high-roller. One o' them as couldn't git 'long 'thout heaps o' money, yit too proud an' tony to work fer it with his bar' hands. An' so—waal, ef he was painted red with human blood from top to toe; ef he was kivered with crime as with a gyarmint; yit I'd weep tears o' holy joy ef I mought only meet up with him—fer sake o' the dyin' mother, who cain't leave this weary world 'thout fu'st blessin' an' kissin' the stray lamb."

"A healthy old ram, if he's kept up with his other half!" laughed Tony Anderson, heartlessly.

"Mebbe so, to eyes like yours, sir," gravely rejoined Old Halcyon. "But never to the mother who's waitin' an' prayin' fer her boy. She's long been stun'-blind, an' hes bin bed-ridden fer 'leven year, 'long of a stroke."

"Then you're just going it blind, pardner?" asked Cook, his usual mirthful grin long since faded into hearty sympathy. "You really had no reason for expecting to meet your brother here in Sahara?"

"Nothin' better'n the hope I've clung fast to through all. As I said, Philo was a high-roller, an' when I hear'n tell o' a 'way-up gang holdin' forth here—called the Six Sinners o' Sahara, or some sech thing as that, why—"

"Stop!" and Circus Cook covered those lips with a hand. "Never mention that title here, unless you're grave-hungry, man!"

### CHAPTER III.

MAYOR, MARSHAL, AND MINE-OWNER.

"WHAT fool's rig are you hatching up now, Cook?"

A harsh, unpleasant voice broke that sudden silence, drawing nearly every eye instinctively toward the open door, where stood a tall, gaunt, muscular figure.

"City marshal—answer him soft if he tackles you," hastily whispered the gymnast, after a single glance in that direction.

Dropping this warning as he brushed past Old Halcyon, Circus Cook faced the speaker, half-defiantly, to speak aloud:

"Fool or not, Mr. Gilmore, it isn't a rig you're asked to ride in, or over, for the matter of that."

"It's easy to see the sort o' critter you're bin ridin', Circus," grimly retorted the officer, with a nod, after a keen glance into that liquor-flushed face. "Look out your free hoss don't fall to buckin', an' end by dumpin' ye into the cooler."

Those keen, suspicious eyes roved about, to pause suddenly as they took note of the knife still sticking in the wall, but Tony Anderson crossed over to reclaim the implement, lightly speaking the while:

"That all right, Jacob. Just a bit of jollyin', in the best of good nature."

"Who'd you throw that knife at, Tony?"

"Oh, can't you ever take a hint, Gilmore? I tell you there's nothing on the docket that comes within your jurisdiction. If nothing less will quiet you, come take a drink on me."

Few sports in Sahara would have dared fling forth such an insinuation, but Tony Anderson was something of a privileged character, and with a faint grin the City Marshal permitted himself to be led up to the bar, where glasses and a decanter were already in position.

Circus Cook had left the saloon, his actions those of one liking the marshal as little as he was loved in turn.

Old Halcyon meekly drew aside, resuming his coat, still combing his beard with hooked fingers, watching Jacob Gilmore with poorly hidden eagerness.

He beheld little to win favor, so far as good looks went. Jacob Gilmore would never be hung for his beauty of face, or sweetness of disposition.

He was taller than the average, with big bones and massive frame, the abrupt angles of which gave him an appearance of gauntness, though muscle and sinew and "solid beef" were by no means lacking in his composition.

He was probably thirty years of age, though a wild, rough life made him seem fully half a decade older than that.

His hair and beard were of a brick-red hue, stiff and bristling, by no means adding to his beauty. His eyes were of a peculiar greenish tint, streaked with yellow, not unlike those of a domestic cat run wild.



"Hain't a king, is he?" softly whispered Old Halcyon to his nearest neighbor, while modestly viewing the officer.

"Just the city marshal, but he's one of the big toads, for all. And yonder comes another!" with a glance toward the street door. "Our mayor, Hobart Illingsworth. He generally drops in for an odd minute or two, o' nights."

Other eyes were equally as keen, and the tall, black-garbed figure of Harry Trefoil passed over to the door, gravely greeting the latest comer, their hands remaining clasped while the two men conversed in tones audible only to themselves.

"A jolly good fellow he is, too, you want to know," added the citizen beside the Wanderer, looking toward the mayor with a very different expression from the one Jacob Gilmore had brought to his face a few moments before. "No top-lofty frills about him! Just clean white, and willing to take as well as give, which is a mighty sight more'n it'd be safe to say about some others."

The sport turned abruptly away with those words, for he saw Jacob Gilmore looking in that direction, and he had no particular wish for a closer interview, just then.

Old Halcyon seemed unconscious of that keen, suspicious gaze, for his own attention was bent upon Mayor Illingsworth just then.

He saw a rather short, portly figure, garbed in fine clothes whose only fault lay in color: too bright and varied for a man rather past than under middle age. Then, too, Mayor Illingsworth showed too strong a fancy for jewelry: heavy rings were upon his small, fat fingers; his white cuffs were linked together with heavy buttons, containing diamonds which matched the studs and scarf-pin below his fat, dimpled chin.

A massive gold cable passed around his neck, looped through the upper button-hole of his vest, showing in a double curve across that richly embroidered garment, to end in twin watch-pockets on his breast.

"An' him jest a mayor!" wondered Old Halcyon, with a long inhalation as he took all this in. "Who'd 'a' think it? Looks heap sight mo' like a county stud-hoss, fixed up fer the fair! An' ef he didn't ketch the blue ribbon, whar's the use o' show?"

Old Halcyon had no time granted him in which to answer his own question, for a heavy hand dropped upon his shoulder, and he wheeled quickly, to confront the city marshal.

"Hope may die ef I ever—'deed an' I hain't done nothin', sir!" the wanderer spluttered, shrinking visibly from that disagreeable gaze, startled beyond ordinary prudence, else he would hardly have uttered words which must confirm rather than abate that dangerous doubt.

"What do you know about the Six Sinners, my fine fellow?" sternly demanded the marshal, his free hand resting conveniently near a pistol, on his hip. "I heard you talking, just before I came in, and—"

"Never no more'n what I ketched floatin' on the wind, sir," hastily asserted Old Halcyon. "Jest that thar was sech a tough gang, somewhere, which they mought be—"

"Mebbe you're one of 'em?"

"Mebbe I'm—me?" ejaculated the wanderer, starting back with undisguised amazement written upon every feature. "One of 'em? An' me jest nobody but— Does it look like I was, then?"

With a short laugh, Old Halcyon flung out his hands, turning slowly around on his heels to more fully display his outer dilapidation, then significantly tapping his echoless pockets before adding:

"Ef I'm one of 'em, whar's my sheer o' the profits come in at? Or was it jest lies I ketched floatin', tellin' how many rich hauls the Six Sinners made when—"

"Who be ye, then?" interrupted Gilmore harshly. "I never set eyes onto ye afore, to my knowledge. What brung ye to Sabary?"

"I come afoot-back, beca'se I couldn't a'ford to ride. Not that I'm a clean beggar, mind ye, though! I'll never come on the town as a pauper, even ef I can't make day's wages while I'm waitin' an' hopin' fer news—you can't give none I don't reckon, sir?" his timidly proud tone subduing to the old weary cadence.

"I'm a-huntin' fer Philo Dobbs. My twin brother, bornded younger'n me, jest a bit, but still a twin, ye see. Run 'way from home, an' his pore old mother—ef you mought jest happen to know, sir?"

"That's your lay, is it? What's Dobbs wanted for? You're a detective, maybe?"

The stranger stared into that suspicious face for a few seconds, then actually broke into a laugh; dry, cracked, sounding as though mirthful notes rarely came along that passage.

"A de—waal, that gits me wuss then the other! A detec— Lawsee!"

Old Halcyon clapped one dingy paw over his bearded lips to smother that involuntary cackle, at the same time shrinking back from the scowling official, whose long fingers were closing about the butt of a gun.

It seemed as though the wayfarer was fated to meet with rough treatment on every hand, that evening, but relief came from an unexpected quarter, and Mayor Illingsworth gently touched the marshal's arm, at the same time saying:

"Easy, Gilmore, please! Unless my ears played me false, you two were discussing the Secret Six; but surely there's no occasion for quarreling over that dirty gang?"

"Then they is sech a outfit, sir?" asked Old Halcyon, doffing his battered felt, with a meek bow to the mayor.

"Why do you ask, my dear sir? If you have any particular interest in that organization— Have you, by the way?"

The wanderer shook his head, promptly.

"Never a mite, sir, 'ceptin' through hearin' they was sech a outfit in these parts onless— Thar is, I reckon, sir?"

"I can't swear to that, for I never met up with the gang," blandly smiled Illingsworth. "More: I never met one who had actually seen the outfit, or could take oath to their actual existence as a league. Still, if you can—"

"Me? I shorely couldn't, ef I wanted to, ever so bad, sir!"

"I hardly thought you could," with a low laugh as his eyes ran over that dilapidated shape once more. "In fact, I've always held the Secret Six to be a myth! a malicious invention of rival camps, calculated to cast disgrace upon Sabara."

"Then who is to be credited with my losses, mayor?" asked a strong clear voice from near the threshold, the owner of which stepped forward as Illingsworth turned that way. "If there is no 'Six Sinner's, who does so much holding-up on our routes?"

"Good-evening, Alvord! Glad to meet you again," effusively declared Illingsworth, bustling forward with outstretched hands. "Looking remarkably well, I'm proud to notice, Marcus!"

"Why wouldn't I, pray?" but with a smile which robbed his words of their brusqueness, meeting that warm hand-clasp in kind, yet glancing over that silk-tiled head toward Old Halcyon as he added: "About this gang, stranger; I've offered five hundred dollars for each and every rascal of them, apart and aside from the other rewards."

"Which will count up thrice that figure," supplemented the mayor.

"Lawsee, obaseel!" spluttered the tramp, his hands flying up in awed amazement. "Fifteen hundred chucks! Jest fer a mau, made o' dust! Ef I ever—don't I wish I jest mought, though!"

"Worth skirmishing 'round for, isn't it?" smilingly asked the head official of Sabara, then linking an arm with that of Marcus Alvord, and slowly moving nearer the curtained archway separating saloon from gambling hall.

Old Halcyon hesitated for an instant, but then his natural timidity was overcome, and springing after the two friends, he gently touched Hobart Illingsworth on an arm.

"Well, what more can I do for you, sir?" a little sharply demanded the mayor, turning upon the tramp. "If you're after money, can't you earn it? You look healthy enough, I'm sure!"

"Tain't that, sir, though it does take a terrible sight o' money fer to keep up so long a stiddy s'arch fer— You can't tell me whar I mought find him, sir? Philo Dobbs? My other half?"

"Your other half? A runaway wife, do you mean, man?"

Milo Dobbs shrunk back as from a blow, his weather-beaten visage briefly contorted, as though in pain. But he quickly rallied, saying:

"How could that be, sir, when I've bin kept on the stiddy hunt fer Philo, my twin brother, gents? Which his pore old mother is prayin' he may come back fer her last kiss o' peace an' love afore she—"

His voice choked, and he brushed a hand swiftly across his eyes. He seemed unable to say more, and without waiting for further answer, Old Halcyon turned back, just in time to see Circus Cook re-enter the house, possibly because Jacob Gilmore had just left the saloon.

The wanderer seemed to instinctively turn to this man as more likely to prove himself a friend than any of the others there, and the ex-gymnast appeared quite as willing to improve the acquaintance so oddly begun, promptly answering the whisper given of Old Halcyon, with:

"That? Marcus Alvord, the richest mine-owner in this region, I reckon. What about him, Reuben?"

"Nothin', only—'pears like mebbe he mought tell me somethin' 'bout my other half. 'Pears like he hed his mouth fixed that-a-way, ef t'other gent hedn't moseyed him off, jest so!"

"Shall we follow after? It's a free show, and maybe you'll hit on some sport, even if you don't make your pet rifle," laughingly said Cook, joining arms with the wanderer and passing into the gaming-hall.

Early though the hour comparatively was, quite a crowd had gathered there, and as the two men passed from point to point, Old Halcyon used his eyes to the best possible advantage, finally saying in husky tones:

"Thar he is! Ef that hain't Philo, then I'm gone crazy!"

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### AFTER HIS OTHER HALF.

THE two men had passed by the faro tables, and were now facing toward the other side of the long, chandelier-lighted room, where a num-

ber of plain round tables were placed to accommodate those patrons who might take a fancy for a hand at short-cards.

Old Halcyon almost fiercely gripped Circus Cook by an arm as he pointed toward one of these tables, where four men were seated at a game of draw-poker.

Fortunately, perhaps, his voice was smothered by powerful emotion, and none of those nearest the couple showed either curiosity or alarm, before the ex-gymnast rallied sufficiently to, in turn, grasp an arm, swiftly dropping a warning word.

"Don't kick up a row, man, or you'll surely wish you hadn't! It's a mighty quiet crowd, just now, but stir 'em up once—well, you'll never do so again!"

"Is it? Isn't it? Kin it be? Ef not—le'go, dug-gun ye, critter!"

"Promise, then? No row, or—say you'll go easy, Dobbs!"

Old Halcyon turned abruptly away from that sight, closing his eyes like one fighting hard against dizziness. His hands gripped tightly, his breath came swiftly, yet with seeming difficulty.

Only for a few seconds. Then, opening his eyes and forcing a faint smile to his face, he softly whispered:

"I thank ye, neighbor; thank ye clean from the bottom o' my heart. Ca'm an' easy does it, 'cordin' to rule. I was Milo Dobbs, then, but now I'm Old Halcyon, ca'm an' a' soler, quiet as a sleepin' baby. Ef ye don't reckon so, jest feel o' my pulse, neighbor."

More to gain time than aught else, Circus Cook clasped the offered wrist, but he was surprised to find the blood moving with strong, regular waves; even that trace of strong excitement had vanished!

"It's a sell, then?" he asked, a fresh suspicion flashing into his mind. "You were just joking about seeing—"

"Ef it isn't my other half, then it's 'nough like what Philo'd ought to be, fer his ghost," gravely interposed Old Halcyon, facing the circus man about, so he could look toward that particular table. "Who do you see thar, neighbor?"

"Perry Clarkson, for one; but, you surely can't mean him? I know his back, but he's too young for—"

"Not that gent, neighbor. The one—now!" with a touch of the old excitement coming into his tones, subdued though they still were. "He's lookin' this way, an'—see his face?"

"Now I do, but I don't know him. Stranger, I reckon. I can place all the others, easy enough, but that one is— Steady, mate!"

Old Halcyon paused at that restraining clutch, smiling quietly as he gave a reassuring nod before saying:

"'Cordin' to rule, neighbor. Thar won't be no row o' my pickin' up, but you kin come 'long to nudge me, ef I should happen to show signs o' b'ilin' over, too soon."

Without waiting to see whether this hint was taken or not, Old Halcyon moved still closer to the table, taking up a position from whence he could study the face which seemed to interest him so deeply, yet be himself unseen, unless the player should turn partly around in his seat.

As generally proves to be the case where bold bettors are playing against each other for ready money, quite a little crowd of interested witnesses were gathered near the table, watching each move made, in silence, yet with none the less interest for that.

The man called Perry Clarkson by Circus Cook, seemed the coolest of the quartette, which fact was hardly to be wondered at when it is remembered he was a professional gambler, and had been such from early youth.

He was about eight-and-twenty years of age, a trifle over medium height, well-built, strong as well as active; one of those men who are hard to handle when it comes to a life-and-death struggle.

He was handsome, despite faint traces of late hours and still more dangerous dissipations, with short, curling brown hair, a neatly-kept mustache of a shade lighter hue.

His dress was rich and neat, without being at all flashy, and he wore hardly any jewelry, contrary to the traditions of his "profession."

But neither Circus Cook nor Old Halcyon gave this sport more than a passing glance, just then, though his turn was fated to come later.

All four eyes were fixed upon the stranger: a mau something past middle age, to judge from his grizzled hair and full beard, though in all other respects time had touched him but lightly.

Circus Cook, his curiosity strongly aroused, glanced from that face to one nearer at hand: and a silent whistle puckered his lips as he noted an actual resemblance between the twain!

Nothing remarkable, perhaps, since both faces were heavily bearded, the dense growth of hair leaving little else than nose, eyes and a portion of hat-shaded forehead visible to the searching eye; still the resemblance was there, even though Circus Cook might have passed it by without a thought, only for the hint given him by Old Halcyon.

That worthy displayed a remarkable degree of nerve, for one apparently so near the end of



a search which had consumed many a long and weary year of his life.

Motionless as a statue of stone, he stood watching that face, like one who feels more than life depends on discovery of the truth.

"If I didn't know better, I'd take oath it's ice and snow-water running in his veins!" mentally declared Cook, as he watched Milo, not the possible Philo, Dobbs. "Will it hold out, though? If not—well, he's no kin to me, I reckon!"

A fresh cause for uneasiness occurred to the ex-gymnast as he cast a weary glance around, to make sure the way was open for a hasty retreat in case coming events should make such a movement advisable.

"Randall Keefe! Watching Clarkson, for duccats!" flashed through his busy brain, as he noticed a particular spectator, whose soft felt hat was slouched far down over his brows.

Just then Old Halcyon made his first move, having waited until the ownership of a nice little "pot" was decided in favor of Perry Clarkson. The cards were bunched for a new deal, and while they were being deftly shuffled by the handsome gambler, the wanderer said:

"Philo Dobbs!"

One or two of those nearest the speaker glanced his way, but the man for whom that distinctly uttered name was intended, never gave sign or start; if he heard, he surely did not heed.

A look of pain came into the mountain tramp's face, but once more he pronounced that name:

"Philo Dobbs! I want to see Philo Dobbs, of Circlesburgh!"

Perry Clarkson glanced up with a slight frown but the stranger never moved from his slouching position.

To all seeming he had taken rather too much whisky for the good of his game. Indeed, he seemed at least half-way intoxicated, though his hand was steady enough when he reached out for the cards dealt him just then.

That look of pain and disappointment deepened upon Old Halcyon's face as he noted all this, but he silently yielded to the touch of Circus Cook's friendly hand as that worthy moved back from the table.

Cook said nothing until they were fairly outside of that little circle, and then his tones were low and guarded:

"I reckon you're 'way off, pardner, and I'm mighty glad of it, too!"

"Glad that I hain't found—"

"Not just that, of course," Cook hastened to explain. "I don't know when I've had anything to interest me more deeply, though from a man I first met this evening, but—"

"You're white—clean white, neighbor," huskily muttered Old Halcyon, gripping Cook's hand with almost fierce fervor. "I'll not fergit it to ye, nuther, when the time comes—will it, though?"

"Not from that quarter, I hardly reckon," with a pointing nod toward the table. "I was watching mighty close, and if 'twas your brother, he surely must have showed some sign."

"An' he never didn't? My eyes was full o' dust, like, so I couldn't be dead shore. But you—an' he never didn't, neighbor?"

"Never so little as the bat of an eye," promptly declared Cook. "That settles all doubt, don't you see, man, dear?"

"But—mebbe he hain't got over his mad, yit?"

"After so many years; is it likely? Come, pardner, things is growing mighty unhealthy 'round here, and I'm going to skin out while it's open going. Better come 'long, too."

"An' leave him? The fu'st chaine I hed fer—I cain't do it!"

"Then ask him right out if he's your man. He can't well lie with your eyes on his. You'll know if he's your twin, then, and we can get away before the magazine explodes."

"The which?"

"Look at the tall young fellow by the fat sport who wears a red scarf; fixed on the right one, pardner?"

Old Halcyon nodded assent, his gaze roving up and down the figure of the man whom Circus Cook had mentally dubbed Randall Keefe.

"All right. See him watch Perry Clarkson from under his hat. You'd know just by that look how bitter he's got it in for Clarkson, and Perry—well, he's froze fast to that poker smile of his, and looks as though butter wouldn't melt in his mouth, unless it took a match or two for company. Would it, now?"

"I cain't jest ketch on, neighbor."

"Well, them two sports hate each other wuss than poison, and when two such men come together—as they're dead bound to, before much longer—it's going to be a terrible unhealthy place 'round here!"

"Cain't ye stop it? Whar's the perlice? Whar's the marshal?"

"Let them try it as wishes, but that isn't me. Better come 'long, pardner; I'm going to rack out o' this while I can spell able!"

Old Halcyon shook off that friendly hand, his old-time coolness at once returning to him. He said, soberly:

"No. Thar's Philo—thar's the one I feel into

the heart o' me is my other half! An' thar's his old mother back home—I jest cain't go, neighbor, thank ye fer the favor. But—ef I was to, mebbe he'd ketch a hurt which I mought save him from, by stoppin'. See?"

As though resolved to end the matter right then and there, Old Halcyon moved away from Circus Cook, pressing into that circle, to pause only when close behind the chair occupied by the real or fancied twin.

Apparently that brisk shuffle given the deck by Perry Clarkson, had resulted in a lucky combination of suits, for brisk betting was going on before the draw to fill, although precious few words were spoken to call attention to that fact.

One and all of the quartette seemed to be old hands at the game, for they let their money do the talking for all needs.

The cards had been cautiously "skinned," and after the first keen glance to determine their value, each man neatly bunched his five, laying them on the table before himself, leaving both hands free to count out the money as each raise was made.

After this was completed, the more important part began: cards were discarded, and calls made upon the dealer for enough to fill their respective complements. Then the main betting began, passing from man to man in regular rotation.

All of the four "stayed in," and this fact, denoting unusually heavy hands where so much money was already at stake, increased the silent interest taken by the onlookers to an almost painful degree.

A dark frown wrinkled the brows of Old Halcyon as his keen eyes took note of a certain movement made by Perry Clarkson, and fumbling in his breast pocket for an instant, he drew forth a small card, on which he hastily scribbled something with a stubby lead-pencil.

He was enabled to do this without attracting attention from any of those around him, and his slouched shoulders and bent head cast his hands into shadow too deep for those across the table to see what he might be about, even had they tried.

"This begins to look like business, but I'm sorry for you, friend," snavely observed Clarkson as one of the players, with a doleful sigh, pushed up the last of his money, expressing a desire for "a sight" as far as his deficient stake went.

"Crow when you've won, sport," growlingly retorted the fellow, with a venomous side-glance that way. "My good money talks just as loud as yours, I reckon."

"Even if it doesn't reach quite as far, Kingdon?" All right: maybe you'll be best beeled of us all when the show-down comes. Still, I'm climbing on top, just so high!"

He deftly exposed a couple of bills of large denomination as he dropped them upon the goodly pile in the center of the table.

His next hand neighbor having reached his limit, this left the man in whom Old Halcyon felt such an absorbing interest, to make the next move, and he was already fumbling in his pockets for a fresh supply of money, when the mountain tramp ventured an interruption.

Stooping suddenly, he seemed to pick something from the floor beside the stranger, then gently tapped a shoulder as he uttered:

"Beg yer pardon, sir, but didn't you drap this yer pictur' keerd? Tanyrate, I found it layin'—eh?"

Old Halcyon shrunk back a bit as the stranger turned his head toward him with an angry snarl, but for all that, he held the card where the fellow alone could see it; the faded photograph of a youth, with the words, written in large letters, on the lower edge:

"Cheating, Philo Dobbs—eyes open!"

The card was caught from Old Halcyon's hand, but while the stranger was thus engaged, another most important move was being made, on the further side of the table.

Perry Clarkson made that move, and Randall Keefe made the next one!

"Steady, all of you!" he cried, one hand dashing back the brim of his slouched hat, the other drawing a weapon. "Foul play! And Perry Clarkson is the guilty thief!"

## CHAPTER V.

### AN UGLY ACCUSATION.

SUCH words surely meant sober business, and there was an instant division of the spectators, each man falling back as best he could, at the same time keeping one eye upon the enemies so as to dodge to better effect should their batteries open fire.

Perry Clarkson turned white as a freshly bleached sheet, but in no other wise did he betray agitation or personal fear. What Circus Cook dubbed his "poker smile" still lingered about his handsome lips, and the shapely fingers which clasped his cards, made no attempt to reach for a weapon.

That quietude might be explained after two entirely different fashions: conscious rectitude, or because Randall Keefe already held the drop.

"Steady, all of ye!" sternly added the amateur detective, his pistol hand lifted high enough to clear the table and cover his especial foe.

"Chipping from the outside can't save his checks, and—"

"Steady you, Mr. Keefe!" interrupted a cold, metallic voice, as a tall, somber-clad figure drew nearer that particular table. "What seems to be the matter over here?"

Harry Trefoil it was who spoke, and those of the company not intimately mixed up in the affair, fell back still further, knowing from past experience that hot and sharp work might be expected when the Good Times owner ran up against a snag like young Keefe.

None of the gamblers attempted to rise from the table, but Old Halcyon nervously plucked the fellow whom he suspected of being his "other half" by a sleeve, huskily whispering:

"Come, Philo! Rack out o' this, afore ye ketch yer fatal! Thar's fire an' brimstone—come, fer mother's sake, honey!"

With a surly growl the gamster jerked his arm free, never once glancing around at the pleader, though he did push his chair back a few inches; but that was to give his lower limbs space for rapid action in case danger should turn his way.

With a passage clearing for him as by magic, it did not take many seconds for the long legs of Harry Trefoil to cover the intervening space, and pausing within half a dozen feet of that table, he spoke again:

"Order, gentlemen! He who grows hungry for a quarrel under this roof, must settle with me. You'd ought to know that rule, Mr. Keefe!"

"Is it another rule of yours to let a stranger to Sahara be openly skinned under your roof, Mr. Trefoil?" sharply demanded the young man, never flinching in the slightest, though he surely knew that the melancholy-seeming proprietor held him covered by one or both of his hidden hands.

Trefoil seemed a bit taken aback by this bluntly-put question, but rallied almost instantly, to begin:

"No, of course not, but—"

"Then you surely can't kick because I'm trying to expose a dirty cur who ought long since to have been tarred and feathered and ridden out of Sahara on a mighty sharp rail!"

"Hard words, Mr. Keefe, but if you'll oblige by putting up your gun until— Must I insist, dear sir?"

Harry Trefoil gave a glimpse of his white, pointed teeth as he spoke, and almost like one cowed, Randall Keefe slipped both pistol and hand into a side pocket before replying:

"All right, if you say so, Mr. Trefoil, though I might argue the matter with you a bit if I hadn't such an interesting text in my fist as it is. And that text: Skinning it is, and being done by yonder blackleg!"

His left hand pointed directly at Perry Clarkson, from whose white face that set smile was slowly fading away. And now, for the first time since trouble began, his lips parted to utter:

"Take care what you say, Ran Keefe!"

"Take care you, Perry Clarkson! I've got you lined, for all you can't see it, and I'll blow you through if you try to pull gun or jump the game before I've fairly exposed your dirty trickery."

"Careful, sir!" warned Trefoil, but the thoroughly aroused sport gave him no further attention, his right arm slightly bent, lifting the skirt of his coat above the table which stood between himself and his enemy.

He did not offer to explain his threat, but there was no occasion.

Clarkson could see where a pistol-muzzle was pressing against the outer cloth from that pocket, and he knew that Keefe had him at his mercy, just as surely as he had before Trefoil ordered his revolver down.

"I've got you lined, and you know it," added Keefe, his tones growing colder, though losing nothing of their original hatred. "I could put out your light with the simplest crook of my finger, and if you held me the same way, I wouldn't be granted time to breathe twice!"

"Dare to burn powder here, Mr. Keefe, and that may happen to you, even yet," coldly warned the proprietor.

"Keep your linen on, Trefoil," just as coldly retorted the other, but without removing his burning gaze for a single instant from the pale face of his particular adversary. "You don't dare shoot me without a better excuse, chief though you call yourself; and I'm dealing out trumps to this cur: when I've finished with him, I'll be at your service, never fear."

"Shoot, Luke, or give up your gun!" growlingly broke in the fellow whose bearded face had so intensely interested Old Halcyon. "Watch the pot, gents! Billy-be-jump-up if I don't reckon it's all a trick to make a grab at what I've good as got won—so I do, now!"

"Not with a double-deal against you, pardner," quickly cried Randall Keefe. "Clarkson, yonder, is running in a hold-out on you all!"

"He lies who dares say as much!" sharply cried the accused, but not yet angered past all prudence: with that masked gun covering him so surely, he dared not attempt to touch weapon or leave his seat.

"I say so, you blackleg! I'd ought to tunnel



your carcass for the lie, but I'd rather expose you for the vile cheat you are, before killing. Steady, all! I'm old business, just at present!

"I say Perry Clarkson is a liar, thief, black-leg, common cheat. I say he makes his living now, and has ever since striking Sahara, by fleecing greenhorn tenderfeet and boozy men. He'd tackle men with their eyeteeth cut, perhaps, for he holds fiftyfold advantage with his cunning tricks and secret helpers, but for his curishness. He's a coward, born, bred and nourished."

Pale as a corpse, the handsome gambler had listened to all this, hardly moving a muscle of face or of body lest he seem to be inviting that hidden bullet; but now a little wave of color came into his face, and he harshly exploded:

"You're a liar, Ran Keefe, and I'll prove as much on your person, if you have the sand to back up your words with gun or knife!"

Steadily the excitement was growing, and at this outbreak, more than one of the breathless onlookers ducked their heads, ready for a break out-of-doors; but before answer could be given to that deadly challenge, another actor appeared upon the scene, in the shape of Jacob Gilmore, Marshal of Sahara.

"Cork it up, you critters!" came his harsh voice as its owner stepped nearer that particular table, pistol in hand as his badge of authority. "Kick up a row here, and I'll jug the whole heap o' ye!"

"It isn't your chip, Gilmore," bluntly retorted Keefe, without for an instant removing his gaze from Clarkson. "This isn't an ordinary jam-boree, but an affair which, for the honor of Sahara, ought to be sifted to the very bottom."

"I'll do the sifting, if you don't—"

"But I will, and don't you forget it, Gilmore. You may drop me, if you are cowardly enough, but you can't save Perry Clarkson that way. I have sworn to tear off his smiling mask and show him as he really is, a skin-gambler, devoid of all—"

"I say you lie if you charge me with crooked play, Ran Keefe!"

"I'll swallow the lie, if I can't prove my charge, gentlemen. All I ask is for the rest of you to hold off until I've made this exposure complete, if only for the honor of the fair town we call our own!"

"I'd never have chipped, if Clarkson had rested content with plucking hawks and buzzards of his own breed, with his hold-outs and secret helpers; but when it comes to fleecing a stranger, and that pilgrim one filled to the muzzle with tangle-wit, I reckon it's time to call a halt."

He whom Old Halcyon had warned of foul play, suddenly straightened up in his chair at this speech, gruffly asking:

"Meanin' me? Derrick Mayfield? Me, is it, critter?"

"You, since you ask it, sir," coolly answered Keefe. "The others are being cheated, just as much, perhaps, but they know Clarkson, and went into the game with their eyes open. But you—"

"Have just this to say, young fellow," deliberately answered Derrick Mayfield, tapping the table with his closed cards. "No gentleman would crowd into a private game, without an invitation. If Mr. Clarkson is smart enough to cheat me, that's my lookout, I reckon?"

Through all this Old Halcyon had been watching and listening with an interest plainly written upon his weather-tanned face; but now he plucked up courage to say:

"That's all right, ef a gent is sober, but it's a dog's trick to cheat a critter what's slewed—so it is, now! An' Milo Dobbs, from Circlesburgh, is sayin' of it, too! An' him jest one of a pa'r o' twins which the t'other half hes strayed—ugh!"

A sharp elbow struck the mountain tramp in the ribs so suddenly as to cut his garrulous speech short, and before he could fairly recover his breath, the assailant was undiscoverable.

"Oh, come off, the lot o' ye!" irritably growled the burly gamester, his hard knuckles striking the table sharply. "What sort o' business is this anyway? Watch the boodle, pard! Next thing'll be a rush and a scramble for our money, most likely!"

"Watching won't save it, unless you consent to my exposing yonder vile cheat," sternly cried Keefe, never for an instant permitting interruptions to call his attention from that particular enemy across the table. "I say he is a cheat, and I dare him to open his coat and vest. If he is innocent, will he refuse to prove me a liar by such a simple action?"

"You are a liar, Randall Keefe," coldly retorted the accused, still with that ghost of a smile visible upon his whitened face. "Give me even half a chance, and I'll brand you coward as well!"

"I'm giving you a whole chance to prove yourself innocent, Perry Clarkson, and if you refuse to accept that chance, what is the reason? Simply because you dare not stand the test I propose!"

"Ah, draw off, can't you, stranger?" irritably growled Mayfield, with a toss of his shaggy head. "If we're lunkheads enough to be so easy gulled, let him cheat his full, I say!"

"If there's foul play going on, I reckon we

want to know it 'fore our good money goes glimmering," interposed Kingdon, suspiciously.

"That's clean white talk!" declared Old Halcyon, with a degree of boldness greater than he had up to that time exhibited. "Stan' back, the heap o' ye, gents! Let the two sports settle it, even ef they hev to lock horns in a buck-battle to git thar!"

"Dare you submit to my test, Clarkson? Open your clothes, and if you haven't a discarded hand in a hold-out there, I'll swallow the lie, and submit to any punishment your fancy may dictate. Dare you, I say?"

Sharply the black-eyed sport spoke, and almost involuntarily all others paused to hear what response that stern challenge would meet with.

Clarkson was still smiling, but his face was white as that of a dead man. His answer was delayed, but before more than half a score seconds had passed, the clear, stern voice of Marcus Alvord, the mine-owner and capitalist, broke the silence to pronounce the words:

"It's a shame and a disgrace, I declare! The fellow is drunk and disorderly. Where's the city marshal?"

"Not so turrible fur off, I reckon, sir," replied Gilmore.

"Why don't you perform your sworn duty, sir? Yonder drunken brute ought to be put into the cooler, and you surely know as much!"

Randall Keefe flushed hotly at this, and stung to the quick, turned his face toward the capitalist to retort, when Clarkson, seeing his long-awaited-for chance, leaped to his feet, pistol in hand, crying:

"Chew lead, you lying hound!"

#### CHAPTER VI.

##### OLD HALCYON CHIPS IN.

RANDALL KEEFE was thrown off his guard, for reasons which remain to be explained, but another was more wary, and before Perry Clarkson could fairly bring his gun to a level, Old Halcyon made a swift motion, and a leather-braided billy struck both hand and pistol, knocking the weapon back and upward, sending its lead into the ceiling as the explosion came.

But fate caused the missile to perform another duty, in so much as it first struck the brass spring by which the heavy chandelier was upheld, breaking it short off, and causing the glittering mass to fall downward with its load of lighted kerosene lamps.

A cry of alarm broke from one who saw the accident, and as the mass came clattering to the floor, fortunately striking in a space cleared of human beings, an explosion added to the intense confusion.

A cloud of black smoke leaped up from the shattered lamps as the oil scattered to catch fire from the wicks which had not been extinguished by the fall.

Yells of terror broke from lips which simple fear of death from bullet or steel could never have unlocked, and men rushed madly, tripping over each other, falling, striking, cursing, for the time being but little better than so many lunatics.

More than one pistol exploded, too, but where all was such mad confusion, anything like aim was out of the question, particularly as the black smoke flashed into angry red tongues of flame, adding screams of pain to fierce oaths and yells of rage.

Old Halcyon never lost his nerve for an instant, but the moment his deft blow foiled that attempt at murderous revenge, he leaped to the side of Randall Keefe, pushing him aside and bending his body forward at the same instant, with resistless force.

"Rack out o' this, pardner!" he hissed, with lips close to one ear of the bewildered sport. "Skin out, or they'll hev yer pelt fer sure!"

His grip had been taken from behind, and using both hands, Old Halcyon rushed Keefe across the room, now fairly filled with choking fumes and blinding smoke, heading direct for one of the windows which lined that particular wall.

Others had taken the same course of retreat, though by far the majority were struggling toward the archway leading into the saloon, where lights were brightly burning, nearly every one thinking only of saving themselves by gaining the outer air as quickly as possible.

Still, a few were otherwise engaged; and amid the wild cries, the spiteful explosions of pistols came, like punctuation marks.

The crash of splintering glass as a heavy chair was hurled through one of the windows, clearing both sash and panes from the opening, helped to guide Old Halcyon, and shoving Randall Keefe ahead of him, despite the struggling of that angry and confused sport, he gained the spot among the foremost.

"Rack out, pardner!" he cried, giving Keefe a shove which doubled that young gentleman fairly across the window-sill. "No time for ceremony, but—ketch yerself, critter!"

Rapidly shifting his grip from shoulders to legs, Old Halcyon fairly dumped the sport through the window, following after with a cat-like leap, which carried him fairly astride the neck of Keefe as that worthy struggled to his feet.

Under different circumstances it would have

been a ludicrous spectacle, but just then none of those interested had time or thought for anything of the sort.

"Up, an' try it ag'in!" spluttered Old Halcyon, as both fell in a heap to the glass-strewn ground. "Duck an' dodge ef ye ketch the hummin' of a bullet, fer—Stiddy, ye cranky critter, you!"

With an angry snarl, Randall Keefe aimed a blow at that officious aid, but Old Halcyon caught his wrist and saved his own face.

Other men came tumbling through the window, and instinctively the bewildered sport moved away, to save himself from being stricken down by those human missiles.

And, snatching opportunity as it flew, Old Halcyon locked arms with the stranger whom he was running so much risk to aid, forcing him off through the night, dodging around the nearest corner before Keefe could fairly divine his intention.

"Who the foul fiend are you, anyway?" the younger man fiercely demanded, shaking his arm free just then, and drawing back his hand as if to strike hard. "By what right—"

"The right o' one who'd rather see a honest man up than down, pardner," quickly answered the mountain tramp. "Don't upspot your own dish, Ran Keefe! D'ye want the hull dirty gang on top o' ye afore you kin finish playin' even with that crooked blackleg, boy?"

"I'll never run from the likes o' him!"

"Course ye wouldn't, an' I knows it too well," a touch of coaxing coming into his husky tones as he gently locked arms once more. "But when he's got a hull gang to his back, an' every man-jack of 'em jest on aidge to down ye afore you kin git in even one lick at the critter? Wouldn't that suit him too mighty well, neighbor?"

"Who are you? I don't know you from Adam!"

"I'm jest me, neighbor. An' ef I hedn't 'a' bin, whar'd you be this holy minute? Back thar a-sizzlin', with a hole in your cabeza big 'nough fer a dog to jump through 'thout tetchin' a ha'r!"

"You mean—"

"That I knocked yen' pizen critter's gun out o' plum, jest in time to save ye from ketchin' your last sickness: that's what, pardner!"

Old Halcyon felt those strained muscles relax, and knew that his hasty words were producing the much-desired effect. Randall Keefe was rallying from the confusion into which his wits had been cast by those unexpected movements, and the worst of his task was past.

"You did that?" Keefe ejaculated in startled tones, as he yielded to the friendly impulse which urged him away from that dangerous neighborhood. "Don't own up to it in public, if you value your life!"

"Waal, 'tain't jest my usual way to brag ary much, but why should I be skeered to own up to my doin's, neighbor?"

"Do you wish to have the Six Sinners come down upon ye, man?"

"The—lawsee-git-out! You shorely don't mean—What in holy time kin you mean, young man?"

"That Perry Clarkson is one of that satanic gang, and if he finds out who foiled his murderous attempt on my life, he'll never know rest until he's fixed you for plantin'!"

"Waal, I will be durned!"

"Hark!" as loud and fierce yells came from the front of the Good Times. "The imps are thirsty for blood, and if you care to save your life, man, you'll rack out o' this in a hurry!"

"With you, neighbor, fer better or wuss," quietly said Old Halcyon, all traces of excitement vanishing as through magic. "I'm a stranger within the gates, ye want to know, sir. An' ef I was to hit out by my lonesome, mebbe I'd fetch up right whar the epidemic'd ketch me wu'st."

Randall Keefe "hung in the wind" for a brief space, nervously fumbling at the weapons in his belt as he looked toward the Good Times. Instead of frightening him, those ugly sounds seemed to draw him that way; but, then, with a long breath, he grasped Old Halcyon by an arm, and urged him swiftly away from that vicinity, their movements covered by the natural darkness of a moonless night.

For some moments Old Halcyon said nothing, seemingly content with the thought that they were almost surely leaving all peril behind them.

But then, hanging back a bit, he asked, almost doubtfully:

"Whar to fetch up, neighbor?"

"Where do you wish to go, rather?"

"That's jest what's a-bitin' of me keenest, sir. Ye see, owin' to my jest a-gittin' to town this a'ternoon, pritty 'nigh come sundown, I hain't hed so mighty much time fer bittin' on a location, so to speak. I grubbed on a bit o' cold chick, an' fu'st place I struck was that gay old lay-out back yender. See?"

"Yet you seemed very much at home while there," with a half-sneer.

"Yit I was dead skeered out o' my boots, on-tel I struck—an' now I'm turribly 'feared I'll miss ketchin' him, too!"

"Catching whom?"

"My t'other half, sir. Him as you chipped



in so grandly fer to save from bein' skun clean out o' his clothes, back thar!"

"Don't give me more credit than I deserve, stranger," coldly spoke the sport. "I care nothing for those being cheated. All I wanted was to openly and publicly expose the blackleg, Perry Clarkson."

"Yit one o' them—kin I tell you jest *what*, neighbor?" with a wistful sadence which strongly impressed Keefe, despite the recent suspicions which had been born in his excited brain.

He hesitated for a little, but then took his decision.

"All right, stranger! Come with me, and I can offer you a shelter, at least."

"Which an' whar mought that be, sir?"

"I have a room at the hotel. There's only one bed, but you may have that, and I'll bunk on the floor, if I feel like sleeping at all."

"Bin thar long, mought I ax, neighbor?"

"A year or two; why do you ask that question?"

"Won't them p'izen critters think o' lookin' fer ye thar, when they find you've jumped out o' the fire, yonder?"

"Suppose they should; does that idea frighten you so badly?"

"I don't count, sir. 'Twas *your* life I was thinkin' of," gravely answered Old Halcyon. "Ef that Clarkson feller should make up his mind to play even, wouldn't thar be his fu'st look?"

"No such good luck," with a hard sound which was doubtless meant for a laugh. "Still, it's a chance, and if I'd thought of turning elsewhere, your hint would decide my course. Will you accompany me, sir?"

"Ef I won't be 'trudin' too mighty much?"

"After saving my life from that devil?" asked Keefe, reaching for and pressing a hand warmly. "I haven't said much, because I've been too badly upset by all this mix, but little as I value my life just now, I'm truly grateful for what you've done."

"Don't mention it, sir. It cost me nothing."

"It gives me another chance to play even with Perry Clarkson, and his infernal gang, and that is enough to make me—well, I'll tell you later, pardner!"

Locking arms with the mountain tramp, Randall Keefe moved briskly away through the night, pursuing a somewhat roundabout course, keeping where the night-shadows lay deepest, once or twice going into actual hiding to avoid a meeting with men who were hurrying toward the scene of excitement.

"I reckon they're getting the best of the fire," Keefe said, with a backward glance, as the two men neared the hotel in which the sport had a room. "If not, the red cock ought to be crowing too openly for any doubt on that score. But here's our hotel, pardner!"

"Better go shy, don't ye reckon, sir?" almost timidly asked Dobbs.

"Unless I'm so lucky as to find Clarkson waiting for me, yes," assented Keefe, hand on pistol.

But, that longed-for meeting was not to come off just then, and seeing no lurking figure anywhere near, Randall led his newly formed acquaintance to a side-door, by which admittance to the upper story of the hotel might be won without passing through the office and bar.

An oil-lamp burned dimly in the scant space for the door to swing open at the foot of the stairs, and another showed smokily at the head of the flight.

No person was in sight, and ascending the stairs, Keefe led the way along a narrow corridor, lined on each side by numbered doors, each one of which opened into a small bed-chamber.

Producing a key from his pocket, Keefe unlocked one of those doors, bidding his guest enter, then closing the barrier behind himself before striking a match to light the lamp which stood upon the little washstand near the head of the bed.

A heavy curtain screened the single window, and motioning Old Halcyon to the one wooden-seated chair which the room afforded, Keefe asked, with a touch of curiosity in eyes, as in voice:

"This is the best I can afford you, sir, for the present. Now, pray tell me: who and what are you, if it's no sacred secret?"

"Jest Old Halcyon, a stranger within the gates, sir. An' I'm lookin' fer my lost twin, Philo Dobbs: hev you see'd him, neighbor?"

## CHAPTER VII.

### OLD HALCYON GROWS EARNEST.

As he asked that question young Keefe settled himself down upon the edge of the bed, lacking any other seat for the time being.

His brain had pretty well cleared out its tangles, and while he was convinced that this odd-seeming stranger had served him well when powerful influences were working his ill, he felt rather more than half-way sure he who called himself Old Halcyon was playing a part—and a deep part, at that.

Stronger than ever grew this suspicion as he keenly watched the face of the old man, and when that question was answered, after the

manner recorded, his own expression grew harder.

Right or wrong, he felt that grave, almost dolorous tone was the brand of an impostor, and instantly his brain began asking the cause?

If Old Halcyon was playing a part, what point could he hope to gain? If he was really an impostor, did he mean Keefe evil? If so, why had he interfered to save him from Clarkson's bullet?

The silence did not last long, but it was embarrassing enough even to one who must have encountered many another such doubting gaze as this, and a flush showed upon the face of the mountain vagabond by the dim light of the oil-lamp near his elbow.

"Ef ye jest *could*, sir," he added, huskily. "Ef you could on'y say thar was a chance left fer my findin' my t'other half, even! Or, ef sech a thing was to be, as Philo Dobbs—"

"Ha!" with a flash of memory. "You were the one who called out that name, back at the Good Times, then?"

Old Halcyon heaved a mighty sigh, his head dropping upon a hand.

"Called, an' never ketched a clam! An' *him* jest a-settin' thar like a bump on a log, never fazed by a ha'r! An' *him* so like what my t'other half ought to be by this, that I couldn't sca'cely keep from wonderin' ef I wasn't squintin' into a lookin'-glass my own self!"

Mumbly Old Halcyon uttered these sentences, leaving little breaks between them, more like one musing than talking to another.

And as he watched, Randall Keefe felt his ugly suspicions grow stronger, to break forth presently, almost without his own will.

Was Old Halcyon another enemy?

"What matter if you are?" the sport broke forth, with a reckless laugh, staring at his companion as Dobbs quickly lifted his head at that unpleasant sound. "It's only one more, and the odds are all one way now!"

"I don't—Meanin' jest *which*, neighbor?"

"What part of the dirty game have they given you to play?"

"That's what's bitin' of ye, is it, neighbor?" asked Old Halcyon, a faint smile chasing that puzzled look from his face as their eyes fairly met. "Shorely you don't reckon I'm tryin' to play roots onto ye, sir?"

"Would the suspicion wrong you so dreadfully, then?"

"Mebbe I'd live to pull through it, sir; but it's a waste o' both time an' temper. I'm jest Old Halcyon, fer short. I'm come to hyar, a stranger within the gates, so to speak. An' what thar is of me, shows open as day onto the hide o' me, neighbor."

"Let it go that way, since you seem to prefer it."

Old Halcyon lifted a hand, the gesture cutting Keefe short.

"Stiddy a weenty bit, ef you please, sir. Pears like the tongue o' ye hain't clean got over the jolt it ketched over yander into the rumpus, an' 'twouldn't be fair to let ye drap words which ye mought feel sorry over, come later on."

"Doubtless you mean something, stranger, but my wits are too muddy just now for easy catchin'-on. In plainer speech?"

"I'm playin' ye clean white, sir, an' that's all I ax back fer my time an' trouble," gravely answered the stranger, seeming to invite rather than flinch from those keen eyes. "An' when I say my say out, ef ye 'cain't put no trust into me, jest lift yer hoof an' kick me out!"

"Come fu'st, 'twas like this way, sir: I see a sport buckin' ag'in'st a gang o' crooks by his lonesome, an' though I was a parfect stranger, in a strange locate, I reckoned I couldn't well go wrong by keepin' to the right. And so—waal, when the pot begun fer to boil over, I jest done my level!"

"You saved my life, I believe?" muttered Keefe, his tones less hard.

Old Halcyon hesitated for an instant, then spoke with increased earnestness, gravity marking both face and voice:

"Waal, I'm not so sure 'twouldn't be wiser to lie out of it, ef I *could* be sure thar hedn't other eyes tuck full notes o' my doin's, jest thar: which is the stickin' place. 'Twas right, I know. Thar was jest *you*, buckin' ag'in'st the hull gang, an' *him*—I hed to do it, sir!"

"Well, you can hardly expect me to feel sorry, since my life was saved thereby," returned Keefe, with a faint smile which could not entirely hide that puzzled light. "But I really do regret it, on your account, and I'll make what amends I can; shall I escort you safely away from Sahara, Mr. Dobbs?"

"'Thout findin' out ef—afore I kin make sure 'twas or 'twasn't my t'other half?" almost indignantly asked Halcyon.

"You are really in earnest, then?"

The stranger removed his battered felt hat, smoothing down his tangled masses of iron-gray hair, gazing steadily and earnestly into those half-quizzical eyes the while.

It seemed as though he was deliberately laying himself open to closest inspection, and as he moved in order to let the lamp-light fall across his face at a still more favorable angle, Keefe flushed hotly, with an odd sense of shame at his unkind suspicions.

"Wait, neighbor," urged Halcyon, seemingly gifted with the power of reading beneath the surface. "Thar's bin too many words flung 'round on the loose, this evenin', I do reckon. Wait, until you've fairly an' squar'ly settled on to the truth as it hits ye, afore ye put your 'pinion on record ag'in."

"Was it me as called out fer Philo Dobbs? It was. Why did I want jest *him*? Beca'se he's my twin brother, bornded the same day I come to town, with the same father, an' same mother. Beca'se he's bin lost from, all the fambly which time an' grief hes left livin' fer him, these forty year gone by!"

"Fer the biggest half o' that time I've bin tryin' to find him, more or less stiddy. Fer seven year back, I hev'n't done ary other thing 'cept hunt fer Philo, hopin' to ketch the pore critter in time to tote him back to the old home, whar his mother—*mine*, too, sence him 'n' me was bornded twins—is waitin' fer a last kiss an' prayer afore she goes to her 'tarnal home."

Old Halcyon drooped his head and his voice grew husky as he came nearer the end. But Randall Keefe, his interest growing rather than waning, listened so closely that not a syllable was lost.

The stranger appeared to poor advantage, perhaps, fighting against emotion as he surely was. It was no easy task to say enough, yet not too much; to lay bare his heart, yet keep it shielded from ridicule.

A month before, Randall Keefe might not have appreciated all this, but, since then, he had suffered so acutely himself that he was better fitted for looking below the mere surface of things.

His right hand crept out, to close firmly yet sympathizingly over that dingy paw, and as Old Halcyon glanced up, with a dim, wintry smile upon his weather-marked face, the young sport said:

"I ask your pardon for insulting you by my doubts, Mr. Dobbs. And I only wish I could help you gain your ends in some way. If I can be of any service—"

"Kin you tell me ary thing 'bout the man—Derrick Mayfield he called himself, I 'member?"

Keefe shook his head, negatively.

"I never laid eyes upon him before this night, to my knowledge. I reckon he's new in camp, for I generally keep pretty well posted."

"An' he never flinched when I axed for Philo Dobbs, right ag'in' the nigh ear of him!" sighed Old Halcyon. "Surely he couldn't 'a' fergot the name he was bornded to, sir?"

"Hardly that, pardner."

"An' yit—'twas pritty nigh like lookin' at the own face o' me! An' that is why I said what I did, back a bit; mebbe it'd be wiser in me ef I hedn't chipped in so brash, or ef I could lie my way out of it."

"Then I mought spread my old self 'round on the loose, don't ye see, an' ef ary critter was to ax me why I tuck so much interest into it, thar'd be the excuse: my other half!"

"Waal, mebbe I kin hoe my row, anyway. Fer I cain't run, nur dodge, nur lay low, ontel I've found out fer sure whether or no Derrick hedn't ought to, spell Philo, an' Mayfield, Dobbs!"

"You are really in earnest, pardner?"

"Wouldn't *you* be, sir, ef you knowed thar was a grievin' mother—eighty year old, blind, bed-ridden with a stroke—sufferin' fer rest, yit on-able to close her eyes in peace 'thout knowin' 'twas all made up atwixt her an' the twin baby she al'ays loved the hardest?"

"Of course I would, but—can *this* fellow be your brother?"

"I'm hopin' hard that way, neighbor. An' ef the lights didn't fool my eyes too nasty, he's got the Dobbs look in his face. Don't you think so, sir?"

"I paid him very little attention, I'm afraid. If you say so, I reckon it must be. Then you were expecting to meet him here at Sahara?"

"No, I wasn't. I give up expectin' anything, long ago," with a weary sigh. "I jest come this way, beca'se I'd done s'arched pritty nigh all other places. An' then, too, when I heard tell—"

Old Halcyon cut himself short, leaning forward to gaze keenly yet wistfully into the younger man's face.

Randall Keefe made no attempt to elude that scrutiny, though his strong, comely face grew graver as he waited the end.

"Ef you only knowed how hungry I be fer findin' my t'other half, neighbor! Ef you could jest—Mebbe you hain't tuck time an' keer to brush up your thinkery, so to speak?"

"In what respect, my friend?"

"You chipped in ag'in'st long odds to save *him* from bein' skinned by a crook what wore a vest hold-out. Would you do *that* ef you didn't at least part way know him, sir?"

"I wish I could say diff rent, but I must repeat it: the man was and is an utter stranger to me, Dobbs. I would have acted precisely the same had any other person filled his seat, since my game was Perry Clarkson alone. I was not trying to save, but to punish, understand?"

"Plainer'n I wish I did," admitted Old Hal-



cyon, with another deep sigh. "Let it go, neighbor, sence you cain't throw no furdur light onto that pint."

"Thar's 'nother thing that comes up to trouble me, now, which is this: back yender, a bit, you said somethin' 'bout Clarkson bein' one of a sartin' gang; never mind names, ef you reckon it's too resky, sir."

"The Secret Six, you mean?"

"Them, though I've heard 'em called the Six Sinners o' Sahara, mostly."

"One and the same outfit, Dobbs. Don't talk of them to outsiders, though, unless you wish to get into uncomfortably hot water."

"That's all right, though I'm thankin' ye fer the kindness. What worries me, though, is wonderin' ef my t'other half hesn't got mixed up with the same outfit!"

"What? Have you any reason for thinking that, man?"

"Not to say jest sure reason, sir, but—didn't it 'pear as ef the man I spotted, thar, was playin' in with Clarkson? Didn't he try to cut off any 'xposin' from your side? An' ef so, an' he is my twin, cain't you see thar's bound to be trouble ahead?"

"In what shape, Dobbs?"

"Waal, I'm playin' ye white, neighbor, and I won't keep any thing kivered over, now we've come to talkin' on the level."

"I've sworn to keep on huntin' until I find my brother, livin' or dead. Ef dead I'll dig up his bones to tote back home. Ef livin'—waal, I'll take him to mother, as I swore on my two knees at her bedside; but kin I take sech a dirty whelp as one o' them Six Sinners?"

"Still, if he really is your brother?"

"That's whar the trouble comes in at, don't ye see? I'll hev to crawl up his back, an' flax all the meanness out o' him, fu'st! Flax, an' flail, an' frazzie him all over! Fetch him back to 'pentance, then clean him from top to toe with a reg'lar sheep-washin', don't ye see?"

"If the Six Sinners don't take your life first, rather!"

#### CHAPTER VIII.

##### THE SECRET LEAGUE OF SIX.

It was not by speech alone that Old Halcyon convinced Randall Keefe he had done that mountain vagabond a sore injustice; words alone can only imperfectly account for that transition from strong suspicion to almost perfect trust.

Had he been given those words to read, in cold blood, Keefe might have felt still more confident Old Halcyon was playing a part, and none too adroitly at that.

Eyes, face, voice, gestures, all combined with his words, however, made conversion complete, banishing his last lingering doubt. It may be as well for the reader to bear this fact in mind, before going further.

Old Halcyon arched his brows, and Randall Keefe answered that unspoken query.

"I mean just that, my good friend. Whether you meant it that way or not, cuts no figure in the case. You surely balked the Secret Six, and just so surely will they do their level best to play even."

"Which goes to mean?"

"That the gang will kill you, surely, unless you foil them by levantin' before the dawn of another day," impressively declared the sport.

Naturally enough Keefe looked for signs of fear or of flinching, but none such met his keen gaze. Old Halcyon looked grave, but he certainly betrayed no symptoms akin to personal fright.

"I reckon you'd ought to know best, neighbor, sence you've hung out hyar longer'n me, but—takin' a look back, cool an' ca'mly, I cain't see it jest that way."

"Fer one thing, sir, I hain't trompled on but one pair o' toes, an' he cain't be called a chief, goin' by his showin' this night."

"You mean Perry Clarkson, of course?"

"Ef that's the name o' the dirty cur I gave a swipe over the fist, yes, neighbor."

"He is almost surely one of the Secret Six, although as yet I've failed to gain proof positive enough to convict him before the law. Even if he didn't see you strike his gun aside, he'll pick up the knowledge from his mates, be sure. Then—you'll pay penalty!"

"Mebbe I'll be thar when settlement is axed, neighbor," quietly observed the old fellow, with a faint smile which certainly betrayed no lack of nerve on his part. "But he hain't on deck, jest yit, an' so—may I ax how you know he b'longs to this gang?"

Keefe hesitated, but only briefly.

"I don't exactly know, but I firmly believe Clarkson is one of the Six Sinners," he declared, slowly, but resolutely.

"Two heads is better'n one, ef mine is sort o' out o' style, sir. Mebbe ef you was to tell me the hull yarn—show up the gang, so to speak—mebbe I could help you see to read your title clear."

"I'll tell you what I know, although that is little more than you might pick up on any corner, here in Sahara. No one outside of that league, can speak with certainty, yet all this section knows that such an organization is in existence."

"For more than two years this part of the

mining country has been cursed with the gang; banded together for plunder, no doubt, yet making a bloody record, so long and so varied, that only one explanation can be given."

"Which is what, sir?"

"That the league, as a league, is sworn to avenge each member, no matter who his enemies may be, or what his cause for hatred."

"An' this is what folks call a civilized country!"

"Sounds incredible, doesn't it? Yet I could give you details which bear out my assertion, if there was time enough to spare."

"Ef so, it hedn't ought to be so mighty hard a job to fix suspicion on the members, surely?"

"Harder than you imagine, Dobbs, perhaps. It would be easy enough to say which man had cause for wishing the death or unexplained disappearance of nearly every one of those who have suffered, yet in every case which I have taken pains to secretly investigate, that gainer was sure to be in a situation which enabled him to prove a clear alibi."

Old Halcyon frowned, but said nothing. He seemed puzzled how to reconcile those statements, but before he could put his thoughts into words, Randall Keefe resumed:

"I'll enter more into detail later, if you wish, but for the present I'll stick to plain facts, which you might pick up for yourself on the outside, if you had cause for, or felt it wise, to make such inquiries."

"That there is an evil gang of this set holdin' forth not far from Sahara, if not right in town, every one admits. They rob stages and bullion trains. They hold up foot-passengers as well; no fish is too poor or too small for their net when the time comes 'round for making a drag."

"Each time the gang makes a stroke, their sign is left behind them. No matter whether it is a simple hold-up, or a foul assassination, they never vary, save in minor details; their evil work is branded with the same mark; the letters S. 6. S."

"Six Sinners, eh?"

"Yes. Or, as others call them, the Secret Six."

"The fu'st 'pears to bit 'em nigher whar they live, 'cordin' to the doin's I've come 'cross by chance. Then the gang is jest as bloody-murderous as report bes it, neighbor?"

"I don't know what you may have heard, of course, Dobbs, but even rumor couldn't well paint them fouler than the past has proved them. On three different occasions within the past year, dead men have been found coffined right here in our streets at day-dawn, with the brand of the Secret Six on breast or brow!"

"Yit nobody was ever jerked up fer the doin's?"

"Not one arrest made, even! But, what else could you expect, when those in power are—I can trust you, pardner?"

"Ef bein' clean white desaves trust, then I reckon you kin, sir."

"All right; I'll do it, but later on. Only—let me think a bit, first, please."

Keefe bowed his head, covering his eyes with a hand. He seemed lost in troubled thought. So deeply, in fact, that he gave no sign of hearing the words which soon fell from the lips of his oldly-won friend, seemingly unconsciously spoken aloud:

"An' to think! Mebbe my t'other half is one o' the dirty gang!"

Presently Keefe lifted his head, his face paler than customary, his voice having a metallic ring as he abruptly began:

"Maybe I'm a fool for my pains, Dobbs, but I'm going to tell you my sorest trouble without invitation. Nay, don't say it: I'd rather talk than listen, just now."

"It began not much more than a month ago, so far as I'm concerned. And yet, come to look back, those devils surely were undermining me, long before that date!"

"Never mind. If you listen to what I know for myself, I reckon you'll grow weary enough, pardner!"

"Not ef it interests you 'nough to say it, neighbor."

"Thanks. Well, before last month, I was getting along finely, as I believed. I had a paying job: foreman and superintendent over the richest mining property in this region, owned by Marcus Alvord."

"I see him at the Good Times, didn't I?"

"No doubt, since he was there this evening. But, let me go on, or dawn will catch us before I'm through."

"As I said, I was in a good situation. I was saving money. I loved a woman who returned my affection in full. I believed her father was willing to smile upon our union, for he raised no objections when I told him I wished to make his daughter my wife."

"That man was Marcus Alvord, the rich mine-owner. He is worth more money than any other six men in the Territory."

"Yet you'd 'a' gladly give up all that, jest fer the lady: don't I know! Hain't I bin thar? An'—I've got to say it, sir! An' 'twas 'long of a look I saw in your face as made me think o' my only boy, 'way back in Maine, that made me chip in so brash when I see you hed bit off

more'n you could well chaw up by your lonesome!"

Their hands silently met, then parted, for Keefe to resume:

"I can't talk much of her, even to you, my good friend. Let me say how I struck the unlucky streak, as briefly as I may, please."

"Perry Clarkson turned his eyes her way, and I lay nearly all of my bad luck to him: at his door, and that of his associates, certainly!"

"Little more than one month ago, then, Marcus Alvord discharged me from his employ, curtly refusing to give me any explanation of his action, save that he could no longer trust such important interests in my hands."

"I could have stood that, though it seemed a disgrace, but when he forbade me to call at his house, or even to write to his daughter, I cut up rusty: that was all the good it did, of course!"

"I couldn't thrash him—her father! I couldn't fight him any other way, for the same reason. And so—well, let that part of it drop."

"Now I'll boil down what it took me a few days to gather up, bit by bit, for I had grown cool-headed enough to take nothing for granted. I resolved to make dead sure of each step before taking another."

"First, Sahara has a mayor, named Hobart Illingsworth."

"He was p'inted out to me, to-night, at the Good Times."

"Then there's no need of my describing him to you. And, of course, you noticed the city marshal, Jacob Gilmore?"

Old Halcyon nodded assent to that, likewise.

"Very well; now for what you can't have learned, so soon. Illingsworth has a young woman living under his roof, who passes as his niece, Grace Illingsworth: the orphaned daughter of an only brother, he says."

"Perry Clarkson also claims relationship with the woman. He is said to be the mayor's nephew, also an orphan, son of a deceased sister, I believe the report goes."

"This Grace Illingsworth, to do her simple justice, is a more than usually handsome woman: too hard and stately and cold to be called beautiful, much less lovely, you understand?"

"I reckon," assented Old Halcyon. "Go on, neighbor."

"All right: and here you have it all! This Grace Illingsworth has fairly infatuated Marcus Alvord, who is just crazy to make her his wife, but the woman holds back, playing coy, of course! In reality, she is only fighting shy to bring about a match between Miss Alvord and that blackleg, Clarkson!"

Old Halcyon gave a subdued whistle as his heavy brow arched.

"Reg'lar fambly swap, hain't it, now?"

"Worse than that!" savagely grated Keefe, his face flushed and his black eyes seeming to turn red in color. "It's a devilish scheme to rob the Alvords of their mines and other wealth, and I've picked up almost enough to prove this to the world at large, too!"

"The woman who is being palmed off on Sahara, is an adventuress, picked up out of the slums by Clarkson or Illingsworth. I'm not yet certain which one, but I already know enough to brand her as totally unfitted to become any honest man's wife."

"Perry Clarkson is a blackleg and card-thief, if nothing worse. The man we have honored by making him our mayor, is not one whit better than the precious pair with which he claims relationship, and he is the brains of this foul scheme."

"Jake Gilmore, too, is helping them along with their dirty work, and I have almost certain proofs that he is nothing better than the rest: and those four—Illingsworth, Grace, Clarkson and Gilmore—are just two-thirds of the Secret League of Six!"

Forcibly, yet in lowered tones came this assertion, and Randall Keefe leaned toward his guest, as though expecting an outburst of excitement, if not of stupefaction at this startling revelation.

Instead, Old Halcyon leaned back in his chair, gravely gazing into that flushed face for a brief space before uttering:

"You don't say! Waal, that 'pears like hard lines—on you, sir!"

Keefe drew back with a short bitter laugh, flinging out a tightly clinched hand as he cried:

"What's the odds? My cake may be all dough, but I'll swear to this much: the woman I love better than my soul shall never fall into his hands! If no other way offers, I'll kill him, like the hound he is!"

"An' so pull hemp, which'll leave—" began Old Halcyon, only to stop short as a quick foot-fall sounded, followed by a rap at the door.

#### CHAPTER IX.

##### AFTER THE CIRCUS.

FOLLOWING the crash of the chandelier with its load of glass and oil, all was confusion worse confounded within the gambling division of the Good Times Saloon.

One or two of those present stuck to the ends they had been seeking to obtain, but by far the majority had only one thought: that of leaving danger behind them in the quickest possible fashion, by the shortest practicable route.



Perry Clarkson, wild with rage, blinded by hatred, stung with the pain from his crushed and bleeding hand, snatched a second pistol from its scabbard, opening fire at what he fancied was the broad back of his enemy.

Jacob Gilmore plunged forward with hooked fingers, meaning to arrest the one against whom the mining magnate had lifted his voice; but both men were foiled by the same obstacle: the dense smoke and dancing flames which sprung up in their front from the fallen chandelier.

For a brief space everything was wildest confusion and maddest uproar, men yelling, screaming, cursing as they fought their way toward door or windows.

Here and there a pistol-shot sounded, the exploding powder lending a brief spout of light to the smoky atmosphere; but no one paused to note the result, or to ask if accident or design had called the weapon into play.

There being no doors to block up the archway between the two divisions, the long room was rapidly cleared without any disastrous crush, and as the pressure slackened and peril grew less, the metallic tones of Harry Trefoil could be heard above the confusion, calling for aid to keep the Good Times from going up in smoke.

One or two were prompt to respond, and their falling to work as quickly brought others. For a few minutes it looked like a desperate fight against hungry odds, but then the upper hand was gained, and in less than half an hour from the time Perry Clarkson attempted the life of his hated rival, the flames were extinguished, the victory gained, and damages were being summed up after an account of stock.

Apart from the injury done the gambling apartment, which could be remedied in a day, there had been an immense deal of noise for a remarkably small amount of damages.

Oddly enough, when the wild confusion is taken into consideration, only one of those dozen shots—more or less—had taken effect on mankind; and then to inflict a mere flesh-wound, which a couple of weeks would remedy.

Apart from numerous bruises gained in that mad scramble for exit, with the consequent loss of dignity and detriment to proud self-esteem, the clothing department had suffered by far the greatest loss.

Now that it was all over, jests and jokes were plenty as flies in August, and more than one citizen of Sahara was pictured as a hero of hardly an enviable stripe by his intimates.

And yet, as a matter of sober fact, few among them all had kept cool enough to take notes of what others might be doing, while a majority had forgotten for the time being just how it had all been brought about.

This may account for so little attention being paid Perry Clarkson after he had fought his way out of the building, blackened by smoke, and scorched by the flames through which he had plunged in his mad thirst for revenge upon Randall Keefe.

For a few minutes the gambler was subdued by that fiery ordeal, and his uncle, Hobart Illingsworth, aided by Marcus Alvord, both of whom had escaped from the building at the same time with Clarkson, hoped to get the younger man off the scene without further disturbance.

But a chance word roused Clarkson, and jerking himself free from those friendly hands, he shook on high his bleeding right hand, hoarsely calling upon his defamer to stand forth and face him.

"Come to the front, you lying hound!" he screamed, looking more like a madman than his ordinary bland self. "Show up, to prove your words or eat them! This way—to see me, Ran Keefe! Come, or I'll—"

A smoke-begrimed figure strode swiftly forward, and a heavy hand dropped on a shoulder as the voice of the city marshal spoke loudly:

"Stiddy, sir! That's his rumpus more'n a-plenty this night, an' I'm callin' a halt right hyar, an' right now!"

"Go to blazes!" and the gambler jerked away from that touch, his hands dropping to where his pistols usually were, but now were not. "I'll kill or be killed, for— Show him to me, just once! Come to the front, Ran Keefe, or stand branded a liar!"

"Don't—" began the mayor, but the city marshal spared him the necessity of finishing his sentence.

"I don't 'low to, and ef you cain't see it 'bout help, Mr. Clarkson, so much the wuss you! I'd hate to do it, of course, but I'll run ye in fer the cooler, rather then hev ye bust my 'thority clean to bits by mixin' up in a street fight."

"But, Ran Keefe—"

"Ran Keefe'll ketch a same sized dose ef he shows up. You hot-heads hev played my office, dirt too much, a'ready. Now simmer down, or I'll play even by runnin' ye both in—you hear me sing?"

Possibly Gilmore might have found greater trouble on his hands, had not Illingsworth and Alvord both come to his aid, begging Clarkson not to cause still greater disturbance.

"If you think you can't afford to ignore the fellow—"

"He isn't worth noticing, my boy," interjected the mine-owner.

"I'll make him eat his words, or chew lead!" savagely muttered the gambler, yet beginning to yield to their friendly efforts.

"Do it according to rule, then," sternly retorted the mayor, locking arms with his nephew and forcing him away from the spot.

Alvord proved a prompt second, and with a friendly arm through each of his, Perry Clarkson was escorted in the direction of the Illingsworth residence.

No particular attention had been paid that fierce outburst, for the general excitement had hardly cooled down enough for men to exhibit greater interest in others than in themselves; nor did the trio see or hear anything of Clarkson's especial enemy while on their way.

But few words were spoken during that hasty trip. Clarkson was too savagely enraged. His present guardians seemed unwilling to give him any excuse for another outbreak, and while a man is in his condition, who can say what seemingly innocent word may fire the fatal train?

"Praises be!" ejaculated Illingsworth, as they passed from the quiet street into the yard before his residence. "Confound a boy, anyway, when he gets one leg over the traces! I'd rather undertake to manage a balky mule!"

Clarkson freed his arms, turning toward the mine-owner, with a touch of huskiness in his voice as he spoke:

"You're not blaming me altogether, I trust, Mr. Alvord? If you recall what I endured from that rascally—"

"I'd blame you worse if you hadn't resented his insolence, Perry; but, still—"

Marcus Alvord left that sentence unfinished; and, it must be admitted, he had a remarkably fair excuse for so doing.

Hobart Illingsworth had stepped upon the low porch, a little in advance of his two companions. As though this had been a signal, the front door flew open to reveal a charming figure, whose white, be-ringed hands flew out girlishly as she exclaimed:

"At last! Oh, how I've been frightened—Uncle Hobart!"

"Frightened, child?" echoed the mayor, as he stepped forward. "Surely no one has dared—"

"Not for myself, but for—Mr. Alvord, too!"

Grace Illingsworth gave a pretty little start as the face of the wealthy mine-owner came within reach of the hall-lamp, and just then Marcus Alvord could have taken oath the whole world did not contain another such; she was the sum of perfection!

"Come in, Alvord," said Illingsworth, then catching Clarkson's arm as though to guard against his escape, even yet, he hurried through the portal, across the hall, into the room to the left.

"May I, Miss Grace?" almost timidly asked the mining magnate, pausing with one foot upon the threshold.

"Please?" came a smiling murmur, and with it a dainty hand which sent a thrill to his heart as its fingers softly pressed his arm.

Marcus Alvord stepped inside, and Grace closed the door. In doing so, she was obliged to move still nearer the mine-owner, and as she turned, her face actually touched his shoulder.

Instead of recoiling, Grace lifted a hand to that shoulder, her red lips pouting like those of an aggrieved child as she murmured:

"It was cruel—to frighten me so terribly! When I heard those hideous, awful sounds, I couldn't help thinking—if harm had come to—to my friends, what would become of poor me?"

"Was I one of those friends, Grace?" huskily asked Alvord, in little better than a whisper. "Do you mean—don't play with me, dearie, but if you really felt—"

A white hand rose to cover his bearded lips. Alvord kissed it, passionately, at the same time stealing a trembling arm about that round, pliant waist.

Grace shrunk slightly, her long lashes drooping in maidenly confusion as her hand fell from his lips to the living girdle about her waist.

"Don't, please—now!"

Softly enough the first two words, but only the keen ears of an ardent lover could have caught that final one: it was so soft, so meek, so arch withal!

A thrill of fire seemed to leap over the mine-owner, and forgetting his years, his grizzled pow and frost-streaked beard, the lover came to the surface as his face lowered nearer and his lips uttered:

"When may I, darling? When—"

But, it was not to be just then, at all events, for Grace Illingsworth slipped from his warm embrace with eel-like adroitness, smiling roguishly, with finger-tip on ruby lips as she sprung to the doorway through which uncle and nephew had passed a minute earlier.

Only pausing there for a mute invitation to Alvord to follow, the young woman—for Grace was just twenty-five, while Alvord would have willingly fought the man who dared pronounce her safely out of her teens—entered the room, where Illingsworth was just beginning an inspection of his nephew's injured right hand.

Grace recoiled briefly as she caught sight of the blood, still wet, but then she gave another

womanly exhibition which, had anything of the sort been needed, certainly would have completed the enchantment her charrus had flung around the mine-owner.

With girlish haste, but womanly thoughtfulness, Grace cared for the injured man, cleaning the bruises inflicted by Old Halcyon's "billy," permitting Alvord to assist her, so far as holding the basin of water first, the pins or bandages later.

And smiling blandly as his half-closed eyes passed from the girl to lover, then back again, Hobart Illingsworth looked wonderfully like an indulgent father, whose consent was withheld merely because it had not been asked for, as yet.

Perry Clarkson alone was out of sorts, though he did contrive to smother his fierce passions while Grace was caring for his injured hand. Only to break forth with hotter rage when the woman drew back, to carry from the room her surgical appliances.

"I'll play even if it costs my life!" he harshly vowed, clinching his neatly bandaged hand so fiercely that the blood was started anew. "I'll make the lying hound swallow his words, or have his life! I'll force him to make a public retraction, or shoot him down in his tracks like a sheep-killing cur!"

Much more the infuriated gambler said, but this is a fair sample of his savage ravings, and presently Hobart Illingsworth interposed:

"Of course there has got to be a settlement of some sort, after all that took place at the Good Times; but it must come off according to rule, or I'll never permit it to go further, that's positive!"

"All right, sir! He can take his choice: apologize, or fight a duel with me, strictly according to the code!"

"And I'll be your second, if I may," declared Alvord, heartily.

"No, no! not you—you must not, for—"

## CHAPTER X.

DERRICK MAYFIELD, SPORT AT LARGE.

ALL eyes turned toward the door opening upon the hall, where Grace Illingsworth now stood, having returned unheard even by her lover.

An expression of fright was upon her face—never so beautiful in the estimation of Marcus Alvord as just then, when her heart seemed betraying its fair owner!

Her hands were extended toward the mine-owner, as though they sought to shield him from danger suggested by his words, and if the love-light was not burning in her magnificent eyes, then Grace Illingsworth ought to have adopted the stage as a profession, for her acting was simply the perfection of fine art.

Marcus Alvord gave a cry: he never knew what words passed his lips, so intense was his happiness at what he saw in those eyes; and he started toward the fair vision.

Only to banish it!

Recoiling, both hands flying back to hide her face, Grace turned and fled swiftly up the stairs, passing out of sight before Alvord could fairly reach the doorway.

"Don't scare the poor child too badly, Marcus," hastily warned the mayor, springing forward and catching an arm before Alvord could make up his mind whether to follow or not. "We've startled her into showing her heart, but—I'd wait a bit, if I were you, dear friend."

"Then it wasn't—you really think—" stammered Alvord, flushing hotly.

"Well, I don't think you need order cold poison, my friend," smilingly amended the mayor, one hand cordially gripping a hand, while the other jovially patted the mine-owner on a shoulder. "If ever a girl has been betrayed by her kindly heart, I know right where to find one."

"And yet, Marcus, it isn't all such clear sailing, either," Illingsworth added, with sudden gravity, as he closed the door with a foot, then led the way back to their chairs.

Alvord was all eagerness to follow his enchantress and learn from her ripe lips the glorious secret which surely had met him in her eyes; but he could hardly break away from so friendly a grasp, and those words seemed to send a cold chill creeping through his veins.

"You mean— What is it you mean, Hobart?" he asked, sinking into a seat to which he was guided by the mayor.

"Well, I'm afraid we're going to have more trouble over this Randall Keefe, for Grace—"

"He'll give trouble only to the grave-digger, after I meet him!"

"Quiet, boy!" sternly chided his uncle, while Alvord broke forth:

"Grace—you started to say?"

"That the poor girl has been worried half to death over your unfortunate quarrel with Keefe. She hasn't been able to sleep of nights, and her days are even worse; more than once the poor child has driven me fairly wild with her ominous dreams and doubts and fears! Why, man, dear! she calls that hot-head our evil genius, and is more than willing to sacrifice her own dearest hopes, if only peace can be patched up between you two!"

"That time will never come!"



"So I told her, but 'twouldn't serve: she declared it *must* be, for *your* sake. She has had a dream—vision or revelation, she calls it, silly chit! She says something warns her that Keefe will end by killing you, unless you yield to his wishes in every respect."

"I'll see him durned first, and then I won't!" indignantly ejaculated the mine-owner, flushing hotly.

"And I'll fix him for the ceremony, too!" grimly interjected Perry Clarkson, with a short laugh. "I've a bit of interest in that matter, I fancy, gentlemen, since reconciliation in *his* eyes, would mean nothing less than a union with Caroline Alvord! And that—"

Just then a heavy rapping sounded against the front door, and with a warning gesture to the others, Hobart Illingsworth passed from the room into the hall.

Clarkson sprang swiftly across to a closet; from whence he took a brace of revolvers, attached to a belt thickly studded with metallic cartridges. He quickly buckled this around his waist, then stood leaning with seeming carelessness over the back of an easy-chair which might serve as a breastwork in case of need.

But his precautions seemed thrown away, since Hobart Illingsworth gave no alarm. Instead, his mellow voice was heard inviting some one to enter, and after a brief delay, he ushered two men into the room.

One was the gaunt city marshal, Jacob Gilmore, the other—

"You, is it?" harshly cried Clarkson, his right hand, despite its bandages, jerking forth a revolver as he recognized the player who had taken part in that interrupted game of draw-poker, and who had given his name as Derrick Mayfield.

"Flag o' truce, pardner!" coolly interposed that gentleman, lifting an empty hand, palm to the front.

"Don't play too mighty brash, Perry," supplemented the marshal. "Ef thar's got to be ca'tridge-bu'stin', time 'nough fer that when this yer' gent hes sung his little song, I reckon. Eh, mayor?"

"Put up your gun, hoy, and quit playing the fool," sternly ordered Illingsworth. "Some time, that too hot head of yours will be getting us all into sore trouble. Will you?"

"All right!" with sulky acquiescence, slipping the weapon back into its scabbard, and passing around to drop into another chair. "Only he wants to sing in tune, or I'll play prompter, you can be sure of that!"

Evidently Mayfield was hardly a coward, else he would scarcely have worn such a natural smile in the face of such warlike demonstrations.

His hand dropped, but he made no effort to touch a weapon, or to guard against a shot, even turning a careless glance around the room before Clarkson lowered his gun, like one feeling anxious to accustom himself to new surroundings as quickly as might be.

"Please be seated, gentlemen," politely said the mayor, waiting until the pair had complied with his request before adding: "Can I serve you in any way, my friends?"

Gilmore gave an uneasy frown as he glanced toward the person he had brought to the front, then growlingly spoke:

"Waal, 'tain't so mighty easy to know jest which is what, mayor, but the main facts o' the case 'pear to be jest like this: Thar was a row over a game o' keards. This gent was in the mix. From what I ketched sight of, afore the thing blew up, looked like he mought be playin' in cahoots with them as—"

"Beg pardon, gentlemen, all," frankly interrupted the stranger, with a deprecatory bow toward the marshal by way of further apology. "That I was interested in the game, I freely admit, but that I took part or lot in causing the row, I must respectfully deny."

"Waal, mebbe yes, mebbe no," doggedly retorted Gilmore. "I froze fast to ye, an' fetched ye hyar, to 'xplain why in time ye hed to up an' slug this gent, when he was—"

"I never slugged him, sir!"

"I can indorse him so far, marshal," declared Illingsworth, coming to the rescue. "I saw the blow dealt, and 'twas by that trampish looking fellow who called himself Cobb, or Robb, or some such name. You surely recall him, Alvord?"

"Distinctly. He said his name was Dobbs, I believe. I set him down for a fraud, or, at best, a crack-brained crank."

Perry Clarkson had been closely studying the face of this stranger through all, and now spoke up sharply:

"I remember the fellow. He chipped in on your side, I believe, sir? At least—what was that thing he gave you, just before the row?"

"Glad you mentioned it, sir," returned Mayfield, with a broadening grin as a hand slipped into his breast, to bring forth the card which Milo Dobbs so adroitly conveyed to his hand. "Some one gave me this photograph, with writing on it. The words are plain to read, but when it comes to understanding them—that lets me out!"

Clarkson eagerly caught at the card, scowling darkly as he read the written warning. He

passed it to Illingsworth, who seemed more deeply interested in the faded picture than in the writing.

It was an old-time sun-picture, poorly executed, showing a young man in awkward pose and illy-fitting "store clothes." Just such an involuntary caricature as one may still find in albums which date back to the beginning of our civil war.

If that pictured face recalled any memories, disagreeable or otherwise, the mayor did not betray the fact, for his rosy face still bore its set smile as he passed the card along to Marcus Alvord.

Nothing was said until the card completed its rounds, to meet the hand of the stranger, but then Clarkson spoke:

"Yet you say you wasn't playing in cahoots with that fellow?"

"That is exactly what I *do* say. I stand ready to take oath that I never saw him before—that I never knew a person by the name of Philo Dobbs—never saw any person who resembles this picture."

"What can it all mean, then?" asked Illingsworth.

The stranger gave a low chuckle, but spoke out frankly enough:

"Well, I'll tell you what I thought it meant, first-off, gentlemen. My name is Derrick Mayfield. I'm a professional sport. I make the biggest part of my living with the pasteboards, and while I claim to be as honest as the general run of sports can well afford to show themselves nowadays, when you're mighty apt to run up against a card-sharp at nearly every corner, time *has* been when I've aided luck with skill."

"Cheated, you mean?" blandly suggested Illingsworth.

"Some persons might call it that, yes," admitted Mayfield, with a genial smile upon his own face. "You understand, I hope? I'm a sport at large, taking fortune as she flies. So—well, when I saw those words, thinks I: 'Easy, sport! Some fool thinks he's struck a chance to come in for a stake!'"

"Then you were playing foul?" persisted the mayor.

"No, sir, not just then, on honor. Still, I reckoned that was what those words meant, until the other gent chipped in, accusing *you*, sir," with a bow toward Clarkson.

"He lied, curse him from tip to toe!"

"Of course he lied," acquiesced Mayfield.

"Still, even if he hadn't lied, I wasn't doing any kicking. I reckon we all were playing the smartest we knew how: I surely was!"

"And that being the case, strangers to each other too, if a sport can let his eyes be cheated, he has no right to squeal, much less an outsider who hadn't a chip in the pot. 'Twas a dirty trick in him, and I'll play even with the sharp if it takes a hind-leg off!"

Derrick Mayfield spoke quietly enough, so far as sound went, but he flung a fierce emphasis into his ending, all the same. And there was a reddish glow in his deep-set eyes which boded ill for the being against whom his wrath was awakened.

"You know him then?" asked Clarkson, leaning forward with glowing interest.

"Meaning the sport who jumped right in our middle? No, sir, I never met him before this evening, but I'll meet him again, unless he has a mighty snug hole for crawling into, out of sight o' day."

"Why so hot against him, my good friend?" asked Illingsworth.

"Well, I lost a pretty stake when the racket came, just counting what I dropped into the pot, without regard to what my hand called for, you understand?"

"Then, I got turned seventeen ways for Sunday in the rush. And, to top off with, this gentleman, here, gave me the collar before all the town, just as though I was a hobo, caught going through a boozier!"

"Adding it all up, isn't it enough to make me hot under the collar?"

"Will you take a challenge from me to Randall Keefe, then?" eagerly asked Clarkson, his eyes all aglow.

"If that's his name, yes. And fight him afterward, if you like," was the instant response. "Though I don't say he meant it just that way, the fellow has covered me eyes-deep with dirt, and I'm going to play even if I never make another lick!"

"I claim the right, as being first to offer," interposed Alvord.

But, Illingsworth shook his head, meaningly, and drawing the mine-owner aside, whispered earnestly:

"Better not, for *her* sake, my friend. She'll—You saw how the bare idea struck her, a bit ago? Let Mayfield do the business, Alvord."

Alvord yielded at last, and Mayfield was accepted as the bearer.

## CHAPTER XI.

### "APOLOGIZE OR FIGHT!"

EVEN before that quick rap came at their chamber door, both Randall Keefe and his newly-formed ally, Old Halcyon, were fully on guard.

The sport made a warning gesture with his left hand, even as its mate dropped to the butt of a revolver, but the same side-glance showed him the mountain tramp facing the door, ready for action the instant necessity should show itself.

"Leave all to me, pard!" whispered Keefe, then added aloud: "Well, what's wanted out there?"

"Just you, I reckon, Mr. Keefe," came a peculiarly sounding voice, such as the sport well knew but a single man in all Sahara owned, by right.

"Hello landlord: *you*, is it?"

"Just me, sir. Sorry, if you're abed, but the gents insisted on coming up themselves if I didn't call you, so—"

Through all, Randall Keefe had been listening keenly. He felt fairly well assured from the first that this was no counterfeited voice, and he held hardly a doubt as to the integrity of Alva Moody, host of the Premier Hotel.

Still, after the events of that evening, he knew it was only the part of common wisdom to keep carefully on guard, and without a sound to betray his action, he left the bed to reach the door, listening with all his acuteness of hearing.

Fairly well assured that Moody was not acting as cover for his enemies, Keefe turned the key and opened the door, moving back so as to give the landlord admission if wished for.

His swift glance revealed naught suspicious without, and his pistol vanished from view before Moody could catch even a glimpse of the hostile preparations his call had occasioned.

"Reckon I won't come in, sir," spoke Moody, with a little nod toward the stranger of whom he caught a glimpse as that barrier swung back.

"If you're not too busy, Mr. Keefe, why—er—"

"I'm wanted, you said, I believe? By whom?"

"Jack Gilmore, for one. Stranger with him, but—"

"City marshal, eh? Did he say just what crime I'd been guilty of?"

The landlord laughed, but with a touch of nervousness.

"You'll have your joke, Keefe, of course, but I don't reckon I'll loose my best boarder by a shift to the cooler."

"Don't be so sure, Moody. These are curious times, and men take many a cranky turn, just when you expect it the least. And Gilmore asked for me, did he?"

"Yes sir. Said he had important business with you, which couldn't wait longer'n it took me to come up here, and you to go down there. He even wanted to come bulging right up, but of course I wouldn't permit *that*, without first asking your pleasure."

"Thanks, dear fellow. All right. Jacob shall have his wish, or as much of that wish as he can scoop out of seeing me. Tell him I'll come down, if he don't grow too tearing anxious, please."

Smiling blandly, Randall Keefe closed the door, standing silent as he listened for retreating footsteps.

As Moody began descending the stairs, the sport turned toward Old Halcyon, that smile fixed upon his face, but with an ominous glitter in his dark eyes.

"Looks as though the after-clap was coming, doesn't it, pardner?"

"You're not gwine down, neighbor?"

"Why wouldn't I, then?"

"He hain't got no big love fer ye, I don't reckon."

"Well, there's more room down yonder for a gentleman to spread himself, don't you see? Up here—and Jacob will surely *come*, if I don't go—all the beauties would be lost to an admiring public!"

"You reckon with me, that it means a racket, neighbor?"

"Getting ready for one won't fetch it any the quicker, Dobbs," the sport said, dryly, as he looked over his pistols, making sure nothing was out of order with their working parts. "But you'll not be kept long in suspense, if you bend an ear while waiting; the house is but a sounding-board, you see."

"Thanks, but I'm gwine with ye, neighbor."

"I'd rather you wouldn't, pardner, for—"

"Sorry, but you heard what he said; stranger with the marshal. Ef 'twas Clarkson, or any other citizen, wouldn't he know 'em?"

"Then you really think?"

"Him as I tuck fer my 't'other half was a stranger, fer a jumpin'-jack feller I got mixed up 'long with, to-night, told me so. Mebby thar's plenty others in the same boat, but ef it *should* be him, an' he was ketched in trouble 'long o' this row—don't ye see?"

If not precisely that, Randall Keefe saw Old Halcyon was determined to go below stairs, either alone or in his company, and yielded the point, rather than dispute it further.

"All right, if you will have it so, pardner. Only—don't blame me if trouble hits you through showing up."

"'Tain't a-skeerin' so much on my own a'count, as I be on yours, sir," earnestly declared Old Halcyon, as Keefe once more opened the chamber door, after blowing out the lamp-light. "Ef this means 'restin' fer you, how then?"

"He must show good cause and a straight



warrant," came the grim, stern response, as the sport entered the corridor. "Since it's narrowed down to a finish fight, I'll never give an inch until I have to!"

Old Halcyon was given no chance to reply, either in approval or admonition, since Randall Keefe strode to the flight of steps, descending them swiftly, turning to the right at their ending, to fling open the door which led into the office and bar combined.

Swiftly as he had moved, his steps had raised no echoes, and the sport was fairly within the room before his coming was expected. And as he stood at ease, his hands rested lightly upon his hips, where showed the silver-bound butts of two very business-like revolvers.

His first keen glance relieved him of one suspicion: Perry Clarkson was not in the office.

"You asked for me, I believe, Gilmore?" spoke up Keefe, singling out that gaunt, ungainly figure from among those present.

"Waal, I axed would you come down, or should I come up," bluntly retorted that official, turning swiftly at the question.

"And as you're too big a man for a little room, I reckoned I'd spare the walls by coming down—not to crowd you beyond your gait, sir, of course: that wouldn't be at all polite! Now, how can I serve your needs, my dear sir?"

A faint grin came to the face of Old Halcyon, who had edged his way into the office, but it faded on the instant, for he saw the man whom he had dubbed his "other half," just passing Gilmore's elbow.

His dingy paws flew up, and he almost staggered as he moved forward, huskily crying:

"Praises be fer this on high! Safe! Ontetched! Not even a bit o' bark skun off! An' me grievin' an' a-mournin' lest I hed found, lest to lose ag'in in a bigger hurry! Philo, can't ye see—"

"Oh, go soak your head!" harshly growled Mayfield, with a repelling gesture that caused Old Halcyon to flinch like one dealt a cruel blow. "I've no time to waste in crazy folly: we're here on sober business, and if your name is Randall Keefe, you're the gent I'm lookin' for."

The last words were pointed by a bow to the sport, but Keefe warned Mayfield back by a swift gesture, his right hand closing on a pistol-butt as he spoke:

"Please don't crowd the procession, sir. One at a time, and the fun will last longer. You, marshal, asked for me, I believe?"

"I told ye that much, didn't I?"

"Tell me more, please," with a painfully-polite bow and his smoothest tones. "Surely you didn't take all this trouble merely to wish me good-night and pleasant dreams, Jacob?"

"Not ef I know myself, I never! I'm hyar to say jest this: ef you, or ary other gent, fer that matter, kicks up a racket inside my limits, as city marshal, I'll call ye down that quick, ef I hev to strain my guns a-doin' of it!"

"All of which means?"

"That I am bearer of a business-like message, Mr. Keefe," coolly chipped in the sport-at-large, drawing a sealed envelope from an inner pocket, holding it up to the light and leisurely reading the few words written thereon: "Randall Keefe, Esquire. That's you, sir, of course. Presented by Derrick Mayfield. That's your humble servant to command."

Bowing politely, the messenger stepped forward far enough to deliver the missive to the gentleman whose name was penned upon its back, then fell back, folding his arms with a touch of theatrical bombast in his attitude, whether so intended or not.

Accepting the note, stepping back until his rear was fully guarded by the blank wall, Randall Keefe tore an end from the sealed envelope, extracted the folded sheet of paper, opening and reading its contents almost at a single glance.

He paid little attention to the phraseology: the boldly penned signature of Perry Clarkson was enough to tell him what lay above.

Derrick Mayfield, however, seemed determined to leave no room for doubt, since he gravely spoke:

"Boiled down, sir, it amounts to just this: apologize or fight!"

"You are something more than a mere paid messenger, I infer from that voluntary remark, Mr. Mayfield?" quietly asked the sport, returning the inclosure, and slipping all into his breast pocket.

"An envoy, sir," with a dignified bow. "I have the honor to represent Mr. Clarkson, who feels so deeply aggrieved by your conduct of this evening, that he authorizes me to repeat: unless you make a public retraction of your infamous charges, and humbly apologize to my principal, you must fight him, according to the code."

A half-contemptuous smile crept into the sport's face as he listened to this elaborate statement, but as Mayfield paused, he spoke:

"And in case I should decline to do either, sir?"

"You surely wouldn't dare!" ejaculated Derrick, seemingly startled into naturalism. "Why, man, this section wouldn't hold you five minutes, after such a show of the cock-tail!"

"And your word is gospel, of course," with a

mocking bow. "Still, suppose I should be so idiotic: what then?"

A flush came into the face of the stranger sport, for he was keen enough to realize no craven would have a voice so steady and even, at his command at such a time. He saw that Randall Keefe was quietly making sport of him, and stung with anger, he cast aside all theatrics, bluntly speaking:

"All right, sir, since you will have it with the bark on. I bring you a challenge from one gentleman, written as though another was to receive it. An alternative is offered, but if both horns are evaded, then I was bidden give it to you, fair and squarely—like this:

"If you refuse to fight or to apologize, you will be posted from one end of the town to the other, as a cowardly liar and defamer!"

"Nothing more than that?" asked Keefe, with ominous gravity.

"That much as a starter, sir," boldly retorted Mayfield, adding in even more business-like tones: "Then, when the citizens have all had a fair chance to sum up your prime qualities, my principal will start out gunning for you. In other words, it'll be shooting at sight!"

"Have you emptied your budget, my dear sir?"

"For the present, yes. Still, if you conclude to—"

"Then it's my turn, I reckon," cutting the stranger short with an imperious gesture. "I'll hardly consume as much time as you have taken to unburden yourself, Mr. Mayfield, but I'll try to make my meaning so clear that even you can catch its drift.

"For months past, I have known Perry Clarkson was a card-thief and contemptible trickster. This evening I positively caught him in the very act, and exposed him to all—Derrick Mayfield among others."

"You asserted, he denied; word against word, and no actual proof forthcoming," coldly interjected the bearer of that challenge.

"Because the dirty gang, of which he forms a unit, interfered before I could force the thief to open his vest, and so expose his secret helper. But let that point pass for the present.

"You bring me a challenge from a card-thief and contemptible blackleg, such as no gentleman is in honor bound to recognize, save with the toe of his boot, or a cowhide. Knowing all this, as you surely must, what sort of answer can you expect, Derrick Mayfield?"

## CHAPTER XII.

### OLD HALCYON REBUFFED.

LONG before this point was reached, a hint had spread through the air of possible trouble at the Premier, and even so soon a considerable crowd of interested citizens had congregated, although, for the most part, these contented themselves with staring through the windows and the open door.

From the very first, Marshal Gilmore had acted nervously, seemingly feeling himself out of his natural element. Nor did his composure return as he took note of those increasing heads without.

His scowls possibly kept many from crowding into the office, but that was the extent of his authority, just then.

"Git thar, critter!" he growled warningly to Mayfield, his harsh face showing traces of strong disgust with the manner in which his companion of the hour was blurdering. "We'll hev the bull dug-gun town on top o' our backs ef ye hang fire much longer!"

But the sport-at-large was gravely listening to the concluding speech of Randall Keefe, and paid no attention to the marshal, just then.

When Keefe paused, with a rising reflection, Mayfield spoke in turn:

"Shall I inform my principal— No! Write your refusal to fight or apologize, sir, if you please."

Keefe laughed, his red lip curling.

"That would please your unprincipled principal entirely too well, my dear fellow!"

"But, you refuse to do either one or the other?"

"I refuse to apologize, of course, since I've done nothing I'm sorry for, and have no regrets, save that events which I couldn't control, prevented me from making the exposure as complete as I intended.

"But I have not, shall not refuse to fight, if you can by any means coax or drive your blackleg principal up to the rack for that sort of fodder."

"Will you kindly state, in the fewest possible words, just what you do mean, Mr. Keefe?"

"I mean to complete the duty I began at the Good Times Saloon. I mean to show Perry Clarkson to all Sahara as the dirty whelp I have already termed him in public. I mean—"

"Then you do accept his challenge, sir?"

"So quick it'd make your head swim, if I didn't know 'twas merely a silly bluff on his part. The cur would fairly melt into his boots if he really thought I would stoop so low as to meet him, but—"

"Look hyar, both o' ye, gents," bluntly interposed Gilmore, stepping to the front. "Thar's too big a crowd on hand, a'ready, takin' notes,

an' more a-comin' every breath. Come some place whar you kin hev your pesky chin-fight out, 'thout makin' all Sahara tired!"

"I'm not at all ashamed of my part in the wordy tilt, marshal," declared Keefe, with a grim smile as he glanced around. "All Sahara will bear it in the end, so what matter?"

But, Derrick Mayfield was not so wholly at ease. Possibly he felt that he was hardly covering himself with glory as a diplomatist or envoy, for he promptly seconded the suggestion made by Gilmore.

"Unless, that is, Mr. Keefe, you are resolved to refuse both apology and meeting with my principal," he crisply added.

Randall Keefe turned abruptly away, his gaze singling out Alva Moody, the landlord, whom a meaning nod hurried to the sport.

A few guarded whispers, then the landlord left the office, passing into the spacious dining-room, where supper had long been over.

It took but a few minutes for him to close the heavy plank shutters at each window, and light the hanging-lamps.

While Moody was thus employed, those more intimately concerned were settling down to sober business.

Now that he had made his point; letting the eager crowd distinctly understand it was none of his suggestion that shut them out from participation in the interesting affair, Keefe was more than willing to draw apart from the many, with the few.

"Who's your best fri'nd, Keefe?" bluntly asked Gilmore.

Old Halcyon gave a meaning nod, which the sport caught and interpreted as meant he should.

"This gentleman will serve, I reckon?" he said, with a rising inflection to his words.

"The best I kin, an' that won't fetch you out tailmost, ef hearty good-will counts fer ary thing, sir," promptly accepted the tramp.

"Then thar'll be jest the two pa'r of us," advised Gilmore, grimly. "Even ef I wasn't bound by law to make sure no ruction comes off inside the city limits, I'd ax to set in, ef only to hold it level."

"I have no objections, sir," assented Keefe, turning toward the door where Moody just reappeared. "After you is manners, gentlemen!"

Gilmore scowled at that thinly-veiled hint of suspected treachery, but without saying anything further, he caught Derrick Mayfield by an arm, passing across the hall-way, to the dining-room.

Closing and locking the door, the party separated into couples, Randall Keefe curtly saying:

"Since Mr. Mayfield appears to be quite a stickler for forms, pray excuse us while I instruct my second, gentlemen."

"It's to be a reg'lar duel, 'cordin' to rule, neighbor?" asked Old Halcyon, in guarded tones, as they took seats at a side table, near the lower end of the long apartment.

"Yes, unless the cur turns tail and plays the crawfish act," grimly declared the sport. "I'll give you my ideas, since I have the privilege of dictating terms, then you can talk it all over with yonder fellow."

Old Halcyon gave a low, troubled sigh as his eyes wandered toward Mayfield. Evidently the old score was still uppermost in his mind, and he still clung to the frail hope that, after so many years, he had at last found his long missing twin brother!

"Your attention, please," coldly spoke Keefe, and Halcyon turned that way with a nervous start.

"Beg pardon, neighbor, but—never mind! I'll tackle him, later on. Ready, sir, an' both ears wide open."

"With any other person—with one who possessed even the slightest claims to honesty or manhood—I'd be perfectly willing to give or take; but never with Perry Clarkson! I'll hold him down to the last notch, so pay close attention to my conditions.

"I name pistols, of course; two revolvers, fully loaded, each principal to provide his own tools to suit his touch.

"The time must be to-morrow, at noon. The place a level tract, lying nearly one mile from the center of town, directly south.

"The distance, to begin with, shall be fifty yards; no more, no less. But, after the word is given, each principal shall be at perfect liberty to advance at will, walking, running, any way to suit his tastes. You follow me this far, pardner?"

Old Halcyon nodded assent, but after a nervous twist on his seat, almost timidly hinted:

"Fifty yards, neighbor! Won't the sports say you're sort o' skeery o' gittin' hurt too sudden, ef I hold out fer so long a ways?"

Keefe laughed, yet with a grim fierceness underlying the sound, for all.

"It's precious little I care for what any of my enemies may say or think, but I'd rather you wouldn't mistake me, pardner. I say fifty yards to start with, because I mean to thoroughly test this knave. For all his fire-eating bluster, I believe he is an arrant cur, and I want him far enough away to begin with, to show him for the coward he is. Catch on, pardner?"



"Reckon I do," admitted Halcyon, with a growing grin. "You mean to tetch him up, little by jerk?"

"Just that, yes! Now, to finish; no interference is to be permitted by outsiders, until one or both men are past pulling trigger. Since he asks for a duel, he shall have it—to the death!"

A few minor points were touched upon, such as tossing for place and the word, then Halcyon and his principal rose from their seats, passing over to where the other couple were in waiting. Keefe spoke:

"Will you step aside with me, Mr. Gilmore? I have given my second his instructions, and he wishes to confer with your friend."

The marshal complied with awkward grace. He was entirely out of his element here, and seemed far less at ease than the man who was preparing to face his bitterest enemy in a fight which he fully intended should end only when one or both were dead.

Halcyon accepted the chair vacated by Gilmore, but, instead of at once entering upon the subject before them, he gravely, even sadly, gazed into that face opposite, his tones low and quavering as he said:

"Cain't ye come down to it, brother? Cain't ye let the ungolly stiffenin' out o' that proud neck o' yours, fur 'nough to say—an' mother's prayin' back grin death, Philo, waitin' an' hopin' to feel the forgivin' kiss of her favor-ite boy?"

"Oh, come off!" gruffly retorted Mayfield, frowning darkly. "What sort of gulf is this you're trying to give us, anyway?"

"I'm tryin' fer to break the flinty crust which time an' onrepentance has kivered a-top o' your boy-heart, brother! If you could on'y know how she was grievin'—an' her eighty years, now! An' her struck blind through bitter weepin' over the son that was, but wouldn't be that to her no longer! An' her fast to her weary bed, tetch with the finger o' livin' death! Laid thar, Philo, I solemnly b'lieve, through brain-troublin' over her wayward boy which went, but wouldn't come, let her tire Heaven as she might, callin', beggin', prayin', sighin'—"

"Look here you!" giving the table between them a sharp rap with his clinched fist. "This canting bosh isn't what I've come here for. Drop it, I say, and get down to sober business, will you?"

Old Halcyon frowned a bit as he gravely met that angry gaze, but he was not to be so easily rebuffed from what he evidently held to be a solemn duty.

"Tain't the sort o' meetin' I've kep' pictured into my mind's eye, brother, fer nigh a common lifetime o' years—no it hain't, now! An' when ye meet me so—waal, it makes my ole heart shiver! It makes me fear you've gone turribly fur astray in evil paths an' crooked byways, Philo!"

"Philo be cursed, and you with it!" angrily exclaimed Mayfield, giving full vent to his irritation. "My name is not 'Philo' anything. I'm Derrick Mayfield, and I'm here to talk business, not listen to crazy drivel of this sort."

"Now, come down to a level, or I'll turn you up, and call on your boss, yender, to do his own match-making. You hear me, old crank?"

Both Gilmore and Keefe started to their feet at that angry outburst, but as he noted this, Old Halcyon motioned them back, gravely saying to them, then to Mayfield:

"No trouble, gents, an' you, sir, brother or not, business goes fer the time bein'. Later on, mebbe I'll try to argue it out with ye."

"Not if my legs are swift enough to save my ears," grimly retorted the Sport-at-large, settling back in his chair once more. "Go on, then, but stick to your knitting, unless you really want to get into a snarl so thick that it may call for a knife to set us free!"

Meekly Old Halcyon bowed to the inevitable, and then, with remarkable clearness for one mentally afflicted, as Mayfield had more than hinted, he set forth in detail the conditions named by his principal.

Naturally enough, in one who wished to protect the interests of his own principal, Mayfield objected to some of the points, but Old Halcyon held firm; they had the right, and were fully determined to exercise it to their own liking.

Point by point Mayfield gave way, until the ending was precisely as Randall Keefe had dictated. Then, in an ugly humor, if his face and voice did not belie him, Derrick Mayfield rose to his feet.

"All right, if you think so, gentlemen," he said, grimly. "I'll tell Mr. Clarkson what conditions you hold out for, but whether or no he accepts them, is quite a different thing."

"He has one alternative: proclaim my charges true to the uttermost letter, by skulking out of town under cover of darkness!" sternly retorted Ran Keefe. "But tell him, please, that even such a move will not save his hide; if he tries it, I'll follow him up, and lash him back to town, where he shall take his full dose of bitter medicine—I swear it, by Heaven and all beneath that vault!"

Neither Mayfield nor Gilmore made answer, but as they left the dining-room, Old Halcyon gently called forth:

"Good-night, brother Philo!"

"Evil night to you, Crazy Crank!" gruffly retorted Mayfield.

## CHAPTER XIII.

### CAUSED BY A WOMAN.

LONG before noon of the day following the explosion at Harry Trefoil's Good Times Saloon, all Sahara was agog with news of the pending duel between two of her prominent citizens.

Entirely too many words had been let drop within range of keen and curious ears at the Premier Hotel, for anything like secrecy to be maintained, and finding that a garbled report was gaining circulation, for the sake of his own official dignity, Jacob Gilmore took particular pains to see that the truth was substituted.

"That's all right," observed Circus Cook, with a knowing twist of one shrewd eye as the city marshal passed on in his holiday dignity. "Jakey's a good boy sometimes, but—well, I saw the opening act, last night, and I'm not going to miss the finale, by hanging back to come in at a fashionable hour."

"You don't reckon it'll fizzle out, Circus?"

"Fizzle, your granny, cull! Take us for French duelists, eh? Not any, if you please. But that's just why I'm telling ye: go early, and you'll not only avoid the crush, but run less risk of missing the fun by having it come off ahead of the date on the programme bills; see?"

Apparently a goodly number of other citizens were of pretty much the same opinion concerning this matter, for long before the hour of noon came 'round, the level tract lying south of Sahara was dotted with human beings, nearly every one of whom was advocating his particular choice of ground as being the most suitable of all for the approaching ceremony.

As a matter of course, the main topic for discussion was the coming duel and those who were to play the more prominent parts, with what had led up to the present state of affairs.

As for the row at the Good Times Saloon, if any one present on the chosen grounds was in ignorance concerning that, it certainly was not for lack of hearing the story told, but from difficulty in choosing any one version out of the multitude.

Naturally enough, there were partisans here, but those who favored the cause of Perry Clarkson, stood more than three to one as compared with the Keefe adherents.

Calling skill to aid luck at cards was hardly a capital crime in the general estimation, where all parties concerned were veteran players. Then, too, Randall Keefe had failed to fairly expose Clarkson, ending by 'running away,' leaving the other to hold the field.

Circus Cook listened with his nose high in air, then curtly said:

"Why don't you give the real reason, cullies? Say that you're willing to play tail when the whole dog says wag! All right: wear your collar if it likes ye best. I'd rather be a tramp cur, and scratch only when the fleas were pasturing on my mangy hide!"

The full meaning of this rather enigmatical speech was made clear when the hour grew later, and the Clarkson party came upon the ground.

Prominent among them was Mayor Robert Illingsworth, as a matter of course, since the ties of blood are strong. But, in addition to this, Marcus Alvord, the millionaire mine-owner, was openly advocating the cause of the professional sport, as against the man in whom he had so recently placed his trust where very large financial interests were involved.

Then, too, despite his outward display of neutrality, Marshal Gilmore was clearly favoring the Clarkson side, so far as his sympathies went.

Circus Cook had taken a strong fancy for the stranger who took his practical jokes so good-naturedly, and when the Keefe party came upon the ground, he edged along until he could drop a warning hint into Old Halcyon's ear.

"All eyes open for queering the act, cully! It's more than one man you've got to down, unless good-luck sticks mighty close to your elbow."

Old Halcyon nodded his full comprehension, but risked no words just then. Instinct warned him that many more enemies than friends were gathered around, and even a single word might result in fresh risk to his principal.

Randall Keefe betrayed no degree of uneasiness, though his comely face was cold and stern-set, and he held himself well aloof from even those who were willing to assert their trust and good-faith.

"After the show is over, gentlemen," he said, once for all. "Until then, please leave me to stand on my own bottom. Meaning no offense, of course, but I'm here for pure business, not to make a holiday show."

This was a thinly-veiled cut at Perry Clarkson, who was chatting and laughing amidst his friends, just as though he felt no possible doubt of the final outcome.

Before coming to the fighting-place, Randall Keefe had carefully instructed Old Halcyon as to the exact stretch of ground to be selected for the duel, together with various other minor

points which hardly require particularizing here.

Thanks to this forethought, the mountain vagabond was well prepared to play what, in all probability, was an entirely new role for him; and underlying his calm, almost meek gravity, was found a rigid resolution, which neither arguments nor sneers could shake one iota.

"Right is right, gentlemen, an' I'm only stick-in' up fer my principal's legal rights," he would answer. "Ef I step to the wrong side o' the line o' law an' rule an' regulation, call me back. But ontel I do that, hold your hush, an' save jest that much breath fer coolin' your porridge when the gong strikes!"

Side by side the two seconds paced off the ground, differing only by a few inches, which, after a brief discussion, was arranged by "splitting the difference."

A coin was tossed for choice of position, and Halcyon won, at once naming an end, in accordance with the instructions given him by Keefe in anticipation.

The second toss fell to Derrick Mayfield, whom fate selected to give the word.

As this completed the preliminaries, the seconds separated, each turning to his principal, and seeing the opening for which he had been waiting, Jacob Gilmore promptly stepped into the cleared space, doffing his hat and holding up a hand in token of a desire for attention.

"Gents, an' sech ladies as hev tuck the trouble to come out all this ways fer the sake o' seein' the fun, so to call it," he began, bowing politely, although that allusion to the fairer sex was plainly an afterthought.

"More power to the clapper av yez, be-gorrah!"

"Supel! Supel! Make yer bow an' skip, so the ginewine actors kin hev a show!" cried a mocking voice from out the crowd: certainly in no wise resembling the tones of Circus Cook, but nevertheless coming through his pair of lips.

Gilmore flushed up hotly, but held his temper well in hand. He made no sign until the different cries came to an end. That was all the more quickly, because of his forbearance.

"I'll not keep ye long, folks, if you'll just give me room to swing 'round in a bit," he added, with outward good nature. "Tain't as the Marshal of Sahara that I'm talkin' jest now, fer all this doin's is outside o' my corporation, so to speak."

"Then why waste time in talking about it?" asked one of the Keefe partisans.

"Let the gentleman relieve himself, friends," coldly called out Randall, from where he was in whispered consultation with his second. "Doubtless he has reasons for coming to the front, satisfactory to himself, if not to others."

"Thank ye fer notbin', Mr. Keefe," still, retorted the marshal, his face reddening still more hotly. "Mebbe you'll ketch sight o' the pint I'm tryin' to make, ef you keep your two eyes open a bit longer."

"Which is jest this, the hull o' ye: I'm actin' as a man now, not as city marshal. As that officer o' the law I held out ag'inst ary fight comin' off inside the city limits. Ef sech bed bin 'tempted, I'd 'a' done my sworn duty under the law, jest as I'm gwine fer to do my duty out hyar, as a man, all white an' free-born!"

"You all hev come out hyar to see a fight to the finish, on the dead level. All right, ef it's kerried on jest that way. I'll do my sheer of the lookin' on, an' whooray fer the man who comes out on top o' the heap, loud as ary other critter dast yelp."

"But—an' that is a but so big as to double-discount any tree-butt in this hull Territory, ye want to know gents!"

"But, I say ag'in, ef thar's ary sign o' trickery or double-dealin' gwine on atwixt the start an' the finish of this yer racket, I'll jump in with both feet, an' punish the crooked one, even ef 'twas my own horn father!"

"Hev you got to the wind-up, Mr. Gilmore?" gravely asked Old Halcyon, stepping to the front in his turn.

"I've said my say, an' ef you're wise, critter, you'll not let it slip clean through the ears o' ye, nuther," surlily growled Jacob.

"That's all right, sir, ef you think it," equably retorted the vagabond, with another elaborate bow. "Still, sence the crooked work, ef any is to be, kin only come from *your* crowd, wouldn't it 'a' saved time fer you to preach to them afore gittin' cl'ar hyar?"

A burst of laughter came from those favoring Keefe, and Gilmore drew back, with another surlily growl. Unless his face lied, Old Halcyon had won for himself a dangerous enemy by that bit of talk.

Perry Clarkson came to the rescue, by sharply making a demand for time to be called.

"It is already past noon, and I'm growing hungry for my dinner!" he added, loud enough to reach the ears of his adversary; but Randall Keefe contented himself with a cold smile, as he stepped to his allotted position on the line.

Perry Clarkson was equally prompt, revolver already drawn in his injured hand. This, despite the neat bandages which were still about it, seemed fully as useful as ever.



Mayor Illingsworth, unusually grave for one of his proverbially jovial disposition, took occasion to make a brief speech, deprecating such extreme measures, yet admitting that nothing less stern could follow such outrageous conduct.

"I call upon you one and all, friends, to see that nothing but fair play is used on either side. If trickery should be attempted, put it down by force, if must be, let the guilty one be whom he may!"

The mayor drew aside, amid cheers from both factions, and the duelists faced each other, with each hand grasping a cocked revolver, only waiting for the word which would grant them permission to kill or be slain!

Derrick Mayfield, who was to pronounce that word, took his station on one side of the line of fire, something nearer his principal, of course, yet near enough the center to fully command the other man.

Standing opposite was Halcyon, a pistol in his right hand, his senses upon the keen alert, watching for anything which might turn to the disadvantage of his principal.

"Are you ready, gentlemen?" sharply demanded Mayfield, his left hand holding aloft a white kerchief.

The response came simultaneously from both ends of the line.

"Remember, then, you are not to fire until after I have said the word. Now—one—two—three—fire!"

With a perceptible pause after each number, Derrick Mayfield gave the fatal signal almost at the top of his voice.

At his first word, Perry Clarkson raised his right hand, coolly aiming at his hated rival, but Randall Keefe only made a movement as the brief pause came before the word 'fire'; then he flung up his hand, and the two reports sounded almost as one shot.

Neither duelist wavered, neither fell, nor even showed signs of having been hit; and as anxious eyes saw so much, the pent-up breath of the excited spectators broke loose in a general gasp.

There was a pause of almost deathly silence, each duelist peering through the blue cloud of smoke in front of himself, to note the effect on his rival before taking the next step.

And that silence was broken by the wild, agonized shriek of a woman in torture of mind, and with a startled ejaculation, Keefe turned toward that point, forgetful of his own peril as he recognized the voice of the being whom he loved above all others on earth!

"Keerful, boss!" cried Halcyon in warning; but too late!

In swift succession came shots from Clarkson's pistol, and reeling like a drunken man, the duelist fell heavily upon his face!

#### CHAPTER XIV.

##### STRICKEN TO THE HEART.

INSTANTLY all was confusion, above which rose that de-pairing cry once more, and rushing through the surging crowd, a woman came, to sink upon her knees by the side of the bleeding man, her hands helplessly clasping him, her voice lifted in wildest lamentations:

"Too late! Oh, they've murdered him! Randall, my Ran!"

She tried to lift that head, but its inert weight proved too great for her unnerved muscle, and wildly she shrieked:

"Dead! Murdered! My love—oh, my poor love!"

And as though herself stricken through the heart, the poor girl dropped over the quivering body, her loosened hair covering Keefe's head as with a pall.

It all happened so swiftly that, as yet, no one had time to interfere, though Perry Clarkson was rapidly advancing, both pistols ready to add other shots in case of need.

"Back, you devil!" hoarsely cried Old Halcyon, barring his way, gun in hand. "Hain't ye done bloody murder 'nough fer—"

"My child! God of mercy! how came she here?" cried Marcus Alvord, rushing toward that spot as he recognized his daughter Caroline, in the young woman whose unexpected arrival had produced such a fatal result.

It is no easy matter to pick out details, where all was utter confusion.

One faction was calling a halt, the other loudly demanding non-interference, since it was to be a fight to the death.

"Clear the way, all of ye!" savagely demanded Clarkson. "He insisted on having it to a finish, and now I'll— Holy smoke!"

He caught the words of Marcus Alvord, and for the first time seemed to recognize the woman whose unfortunate appearance had caused the defeat if not death of his rival.

"Order! Enforce order, marshal!" shouted Illingsworth, rushing after his nephew, catching him by an arm just as Clarkson recoiled at that recognition.

"You bet I just will, then!" and Gilmore strode up to Halcyon, who roughly shook off the hand which sought to detain him, saying:

"Hands off, sir! My man's down an'—"

"Then throw up the sponge fer him, dug-gun ye, critter!"

"It went up, when he went down, didn't it? We've got enough; heaven grant it hain't too mighty much, though!"

Marcus Alvord reached the side of his mourning daughter, almost roughly snatching her up in his strong arms, bearing her from the bleeding body of her lover, despite her agonized cries.

"Dead—my love!" the poor girl wailed, heart-brokenly, feebly struggling to break away from father to one far more dear. "Dead—murdered—oh, my poor darling!"

"Make way, will you?" hoarsely cried Alvord, as the crowd moved closer to them. "Can't you see that— Make way, I say!"

All at once Caroline's struggles ceased, and with a low, gurgling moan, she sunk a limp and nerveless weight upon the arms of her parent.

Just then Hobart Illingsworth hurried up, and instantly recognizing the truth, hastily uttered:

"She's fainted, poor thing! This way, Alvord; I'll clear a passage for you, or—stand back, all! Give us air, you idiots! Would you see the poor lady die like a— Back, or I'll know the reason why!"

Never before, since his first appearance in Sahara, had Hobart Illingsworth betrayed such a loss of composure, and in place of his usual bland smile, his round face bore darkest frowns, before which the awed witeesses recoiled as they would have fallen back before no other man in all that region.

"This way, Alvord," he added, with a gesture toward the horse and road-wagon which he had driven to the grounds. "Poor child! She'll need help such as only another woman— To my house, first!"

"Yes, to Grace," huskily muttered the mine-owner. "I can't understand how she came to find out—"

"Don't talk, man, but act!" impatiently interrupted the mayor, as he unfastened the halter, then came around to aid his friend. "Give her to me, while you get in—so!"

Acting like one more than half-dazed by this unexpected blow, Marcus Alvord obeyed, and then, receiving the senseless girl, he held her up on his lap while Illingsworth climbed in beside them, touching up the willing horse and driving rapidly toward town.

Very few words were spoken by either man during that brief drive, for each had been strongly agitated, and neither one felt quite sure it was not a corpse they had in charge just then.

The mile of ground was swiftly covered, and as they dashed up to the narrow yard before the mayor's house, the sound of hoofs and wheels brought Grace Illingsworth to the door.

She gave a little scream as she recognized the shape of a woman, rather than that of Perry Clarkson, which those sounds prepared her to behold. But she quickly rallied, and at a word from her uncle, flew up to her own chamber to prepare for this unexpected guest.

For once, Marcus Alvord had no love-light in his eyes even for this bewitching creature, and his face was very stern, very pale and hard-set, as he placed the body of his only child upon the bed which Grace had so deftly arranged for her reception.

"Help her—save her, if you can, Miss Illingsworth," he said, in tones which he himself could never have recognized, had he given it a thought in passing. "She isn't—not—gone?"

Grace was bending over the insensible figure, her white hands working swiftly and intelligently, but at this faltering query, she arose gently touching each shoulder with a hand, gazing steadily into his troubled eyes as she softly spoke:

"No, dear friend; not dead, but swooning. Trust her with me. Even if not so dear to your noble heart, I would save her; but when it is for your sake, as well, how could I fail?"

Hobart Illingsworth turned silently away, and so did not see what followed; a pair of gray-bearded lips touching a white brow.

"God bless you, my angel!" huskily muttered Alvord, then hastily leaving the chamber, following the mayor down-stairs to Illingsworth's particular snuggery.

Uttering words of cheery comfort, Illingsworth produced liquor and cigars, placing both upon the little table, insisting on his guest taking a generous dram of the amber liquid.

"Grace'll fetch the little lady 'round all right, or she'd never have said so, even to you, my friend," heartily declared the host, as he sat opposite the mine-owner. "By this time to-morrow, Caroline will be fully as well as she ever was, and I just know it!"

Alvord drew a long breath, almost a sigh. His brows drew nearer together, and his face was the picture of sullen gloom. Now that he had been relieved of his worst fears for the life of his child, he could give thought to lesser disagreeables.

"But just think of it, man! Think of such a show, before the whole town! I'll never be able to hold up my head again! And she—both of us disgraced! Eternally disgraced!"

For some little time Hobart Illingsworth permitted the father to continue in this gloomy strain, all the while covertly studying his face, and weighing projects of his own devising. But

then, with a hand crossing the table to arrest the attention of the mine-owner, he said:

"Not disgraced, my dear friend; only foolish, on her part."

"And for that worthless rascal! Before all the town! I'll never have courage to face them down, after this outrageous display!"

"Your surely don't think of running away! Not leaving town?"

"What else can I do? She's covered herself with ridicule, and me—"

"Not in my eyes, old friend," with an increase of earnestness. "I am more than willing to act as her shield; and as her husband, too!"

Marcus Alvord gave a sudden start, his eyes opening widely. But then he shook his head, saying moodily:

"I told you before, Illingsworth: that can never work. Carry hates and fears you, both. She holds that you have caused all this trouble between Keefe and me. She declares you are his bitterest enemy."

Illingsworth gave a low, oily chuckle before replying:

"That's all right, my dear fellow. I'm willing to take my chances of smoothing everything over, if you'll only pledge me your word that I may have Carry for a wife. Will you do so much?"

"But, Clarkson?"

"Never mind Perry; boys can wait longer than middle-aged men, of course. As for myself, I know the girl isn't in love with me, as yet, but I'm past the silly-sentimental age, and am willing to take what she can give me. Will you do your part; though?"

Alvord lowered his eyes, his fingers twitching nervously about his glass. And as though to determine his wavering mind, Illingsworth spoke again, quietly, yet in a tone of strong significance:

"Don't forget, my dear friend, what I've hinted at before: that my little girl Grace has firmly vowed to never marry while I remain a single man. You hardly wish for that, I hope?"

"You know better than that, Illingsworth. You know I'd wade through fire to my lips for a bare chance of winning Grace for my wife! But you ought to know, too, how stubbornly Carry sticks by her foolish fancy for that rascally Keefe!"

"I do know as much, but, as I said, I'm too old for empty sentiment. I'm heartily willing to take her first, then win her heart later. The main question is, will you back me up in my suit, provided I play the same friendly part in your behalf?"

Before Alvord could make reply to this blunt question, both men caught the sound of quick footfalls descending the stairs, and the mayor had barely time to whisper a hasty warning, before the door opened, to admit Grace Illingsworth, who quickly quelled their fears:

"The dear child has her senses, and has asked for you, sir," with a little bow toward Alvord. "Will you please—you know where you left her," instantly comprehending the covert gesture given by her uncle, and at once accepting the sign. "Perhaps 't would be better for you to spend the first few minutes alone in her company, dear sir."

Alvord paused only long enough to lift a white hand to his lips, and shoot a love-look into those lustrous eyes. Then he hastened from the room to run up-stairs, while Grace closed the door silently.

"Well, what is it now?" she abruptly asked, as she faced the mayor. "You bade me stay here, didn't you?"

"Yes. I've opened the trenches, at last, and let him see that he can hope to gain his own point, only after helping me win mine."

"You've let him know Perry is only second fiddle, then?"

"Of course. It had to come some time, and why not now?"

"We'll have trouble with the young fellow, though! How will you smooth matters over with him?" asked Grace, a frown marring her beauty just then.

"One way or another, what matter?" with a careless gesture. "He understood that it was no settled thing; that whichever of us stood the best show, that one was to eat the apple, didn't he?"

"Yes, but of late—well, he's dead gone on the girl! And you ought to know how ugly he can be, once he thinks he has good cause."

"I know that he'll take the medicine measured out for his lips, or fare worse," came the old response. "He stood little enough show of raking down the prize, at best, but since he has downed Keefe—"

"Killed him, you mean?"

"I hope so! Downed him, at any rate, thanks to the coming of the girl just in the nick of time! Odd, too, wasn't it?"

Illingsworth gave a hasty review of the duel, in which Grace betrayed strong interest, then resumed:

"She saw him fall, and must have seen Perry shooting him down. That will set her against the boy, too bitterly for the old scheme to work, even with her father on our side."

"Which he is, of course?"

"Thanks to your witchery, yes," joining the



woman in her subdued, but hearty laugh. "Still, he will not be any too easy to handle, unless you can make him fully understand that his winning you, hangs entirely on my marrying his daughter."

"You mean just that, then, Hobart?"

"Yes. Now's your chance, when his nerves are unstrung. I'll go see how Keefe fared, and leave you a clear field. Do your best, while you have him in your power; and remember, *we've got to win the game!*"

"I'll win it, else I'm no woman," was the confident reply.

## CHAPTER XV.

### THE FALLEN DUELIST.

OLD HALCYON was among the first to reach the spot where Randall Keefe had fallen to the shots of Perry Clarkson, and Marcus Alvord had hardly taken his daughter away before the mountain tramp took possession of the body.

For a brief space it seemed as though the old fellow had been thrown off his balance by the unfortunate occurrence, against which he could not possibly have guarded, but now his shaken nerve had rallied, and no man could have found a more jealous guardian.

"Back, ye critters, ef ye don't want me to shoot a air-hole 'bout him!" he sternly cried, swinging an armed hand around to emphasize his meaning. "Stan' clear, I say! Nobody but the doctor kin—"

"That's my business, sir," brusquely interjected a middle-aged man, who hastened to the side of the fallen duelist. "Give us room, men! If not human, at least try to play you wery!"

No man in Sahara was better known than Doctor Blakelock, and very few had greater influence than he, at a time like this.

At first glance, Old Halcyon was inclined to view him suspiciously, but that lasted barely longer than a single breath: the profession "stuck out all over him," and with a feeling of great relief, the honest old fellow turned his care to keeping a space free from intrusion about that spot.

"Keep back of the lines, everybody!" warned the sharp voice of Perry Clarkson, who still held his weapons in readiness for use, and whose unusual pallor was all the more noticeable from the little spots of bright red which marked his cheeks. "He stuck out for a finish fight, and now he's got to have it! Back, I say, the whole of you!"

Not a few of the excited spectators made haste to obey, but a few of those who held no particular love for the dandy sport, showed less inclination that way.

Old Halcyon, now that a medical man had taken charge of his fallen principal, felt more at liberty to act on his own hook, promptly faced the fire-eater, sternly replying:

"Even a hog can't hev more'n the hull o' the feed-trough, sir! My man is down, an' you don't—"

"Who's to know it isn't one of his currish tricks? Stand aside, I repeat, all of you! I want a square look for myself, before—"

"You'll hev to move us, then, sir," sternly interrupted Halcyon, partly lifting his pistol as though in no wise loth to back words by actions. "My man's down, an' that leaves me to hold up this end. Ef you reckon it's a trick, hold your ground until the medicine sharp kin report as to how—"

"Don't play the ass, over yonder!" came the irritable call from Dr. Blakelock. "Keefe has got all the fighting he can digest, I'm thinking."

Perry Clarkson rose upon his toes, like one about to express his exultation in a wild cheer of triumph, but, fortunately for his own credit, he managed to smother the cry, and restrain himself for the time being.

"That's plain 'nough fer ye I reckon, sir?" gloomily asked Old Halcyon, powerfully affected by the reverse which had so strangely come to the man whose cause he was still ready to champion. "What more kin ye ask?"

The dandy gambler made him no reply, for just then Derrick Mayfield, who had been slow to push himself forward since giving the word, gained his side, touching an arm, and leading his principal aside for a brief space.

Seeing this, Old Halcyon returned to where Dr. Blakelock was caring for the fallen duelist, heedless of the many curious eyes which were taking note of his every action, thinking only of the patient which had come to his hands.

"He hain't—'tain't all over doctor?" asked Halcyon, in low, husky tones, as he stooped to gaze down upon that pain-contorted face now exposed to view as Blakelock moved the sport for a more thorough examination.

"How many times must I say— Oh!" changing his irritable tone as he glanced over a shoulder, to recognize the speaker. "That's different, of course, since you were his second."

"You didn't— Livin', praise Heaven!"

Old Halcyon gave a suppressed shout as he saw Keefe part his lips, and give a smothered moan as of pain. Surely he was alive!

"What for? He's alive, but whether that'll last long enough to say thanks over, is more than I'm ready to swear."

"He's bad hurt, then?"

"How can I say, without knowing my own self? Get out! Keep those other idiots at bay until I can look—will you get out, sir?"

If Old Halcyon had been better acquainted with Samuel Blakelock, he would have known this irritation boded ill for the fallen duelist.

Those who were accustomed to his peculiarities, and who caught his tones now, exchanged looks of understanding: glad, or regretful, just according to how their sympathies went. For they knew that the physician was already despairing of saving that life!

Perhaps it was just as well that Old Halcyon lacked this inner-sight, for now, as he turned away to perform the final duty allotted to him as a second, the knowledge that Randall Keefe was still alive, lent him nerve enough for the emergency.

He saw that Clarkson was in consultation with Mayfield and Gilmore, forming a little knot by themselves, yet near enough to command a fair view of the spot where Randall Keefe was under examination.

He had barely time enough to note this fact, when Clarkson moved toward him, hands unarmed, yet keeping close to the visible butts of his weapons, like one who is resolved not again to be caught off guard.

The gambler bowed stiffly to Halcyon, the two men forming an odd contrast as they confronted each other, with nearly all eyes turned their way, eager to see and comprehend.

"Under the condition imposed by your principal, sir, I am forced to demand a plain answer: does your man cry enough?"

"He's past cryin', or mebbe you wouldn't be axin' it so turrible brash," came the prompt retort.

"You own up he's got enough, in reality or in seeming?" persisted Clarkson, too greatly elated by his easy victory to care much what sort of an impression he produced on others. "I'm more than ready to go on with the circus, of course, but a man can't fight by his lonesome, you know!"

"Waal, mebbe that's then as wouldn't mind helpin' ye git a full feed, sir, ef you're so turrible hungry you can't wait longer," gravely answered the stranger.

Derrick Mayfield drew near, just in time to pick up the thread before it could well be lost sight of.

"Excuse me, gentlemen, but one word ought to be sufficient to settle the rest of it. Is Mr. Keefe disabled too badly for standing on his feet, unsupported?"

"Yes, I'm sorry to say he is jest that same," reluctantly admitted Halcyon.

"Then that settles it, and the fight is at an end."

"Wait a moment, my dear fellow," interposed Clarkson, as Old Halcyon, after returning Mayfield's bow, was about to move toward his principal. "Are you satisfied that no trickery was used on my side?"

Old Halcyon hesitated, but only for an instant.

He had never seen Miss Alvord before she made such an unfortunate appearance, to her lover's undoing, but before the last night had given way to a new day, Randall Keefe had told him much more than has found record in these pages, and the mountain vagabond knew well enough what power had caused that unfortunate catastrophe.

"Waal," he reluctantly admitted, "I can't say as 'twasn't all kerried out 'cordin' to rule, fur's you hed to do with it."

"In other words, you acquit us of all unfairness?" asked Mayfield.

"Yes, 'twas all fair 'nough, from the pint o' view shooters'd nat'ally take of it," admitted Dobbs, "but I'd hate most wowedly fer our pore old mother to know you hed tuck part on sech a side, Philo!"

Derrick Mayfield flushed up hotly, his right hand clinching tightly as though it itched to strike, and his voice grew harsher as he said:

"Will you never have done with that infernal nonsense, man? You've run it into the ground plenty deep enough to break it off, now."

"But, brother—"

"For the last time I swear I'm no brother of yours, sir! Now you let up on that worn-out string, or you and I will have a fight. Is that plain enough talk to bore a way into your dense pate, man?"

Halcyon recoiled a bit, but the hand which he uplifted was moved by grief, rather than by fear.

"A man can't well fight his own self, an' I'm feelin' like you was my t'other half, too turrible plain fer even gittin' mad at scoffs an' revilin's an' ary sech like. May the good Lord soften that hard heart, an' open it wide 'nough to hear the dyin'—"

Derrick Mayfield, with an angry gesture turned abruptly away, and Old Halcyon permitted his prayer to die out in a sad sigh of regret.

Just then Dr. Blakelock bustled forward to report the result of his examination.

"Keefe is badly hurt—very seriously wounded, in fact, sir. Only time can tell just what the result will be, but I think I am safe in saying he has a chance for recovery, provided he can re-

ceive good nursing, and be kept quiet, free from unusual excitement."

"So bad as all that?" ejaculated Old Halcyon, plainly showing how greatly he was shocked by the news.

"So bad that it may easily be made worse, sir," quickly added the medical man, with an irritable frown. "Don't chatter, but *act!* Where shall I have him taken? Who is to care for him?"

Old Halcyon grew still more grave at these rapid questions. For once in his life he was wholly at a loss how to answer, what to do.

"I'm a stranger within the gates, doctor, an' don't know no more'n the man in the moon whar the pore critter's fri'nds hang out, 'cept—Thar's the hotel!"

"And that's right where the poor fellow is to go, of course," cried honest Alva Moody, panting through the haste with which he had come from town at his first word of trouble overtaking his lodger. "We'll do our level best, Nancy, 'nd me, but—"

"All right, then, and fall to work, can't you? Such blunder-headed nincompoops I never met up with in the whole course of my professional experience!" fumed the doctor, himself bouncing about like the proverbial pea on a hot griddle.

"I'll go get fixed for him, doctor," declared Moody, excitedly. "A whiter man never drew the breath of life than Ran Keefe, and I don't care who hears me say it, neither! And while I've a crust, or a roof, or a dollar, the biggest half of it belongs to the boy!"

"You're clean white, sir, an' I'll never fergit this in ye," earnestly declared Old Halcyon, snatching time in which to give that honest hand a cordial grasp. "You'll git your pay in the next world, ef you never don't in this!"

"That's all right. You see to his fetchin', an' I'll go git ready. Nancy'll nurse him like an only son, ef I do say so myself!" spluttered Moody, then starting off in a dog-trot for home.

And so matters were finally arranged.

The fallen duelist was carefully carried to town, and placed upon the bed which Mrs. Moody had prepared for his reception.

Dr. Blakelock made a more careful examination of his injuries. He had been wounded three times by those swift-following shots, but only one of the pellets had remained in his body.

That was probed for, found and extracted. The wounds were carefully cleansed and bandaged, then the doctor hurried off to look after other patients whom he could neglect no longer.

"I'll drop in later, but the most depends on the watchers," he said while taking his departure. "Keep all fools on the right side of the door, and agree with the patient in everything: help me help him, and nature will help the whole of us. Understand?"

Old Halcyon meekly promised to strictly follow orders, and then took up his station by the bedside, gravely watching that deathlike countenance, so sadly altered from the one his memory recalled.

Night had fallen before Randall Keefe regained consciousness, and then it came so suddenly that Old Halcyon was startled out of his seat.

"Clarkson—did I down him?" faintly asked Keefe.

## CHAPTER XVI.

### DERRICK MAYFIELD SEEKS BACKING.

NATURALLY enough, Perry Clarkson was surrounded by men who were eager to offer their congratulations on his victory over such a rancorous adversary, even before the fallen duelist was removed from the ground, which showed red with his life-blood.

Although a professional gambler, Clarkson had won many ardent friends by his suave manners, while nothing served to stir up his hot temper, and despite the black charges which had been brought against him by Randall Keefe, very few of those friends had deserted his cause.

Possibly it might have been different had Clarkson been other than what he frankly declared; what would have been an unpardonable sin in an amateur, or one who merely touched the papers by way of passing an idle hour, was merely a venial fault in a man of his class.

Wearing the gambler's badge was equivalent to giving a fair warning unto all. If they accepted that warning, they accepted the consequences, as well. So ran the unwritten law!

By this rush of friends, Derrick Mayfield became separated from the man to whom he had so oddly attached himself, and for some little time the "sport-at-large" was wholly unable to win the word in private he was really anxious to secure.

That opportunity did not fall in his way until after the entire company had deserted the dueling-ground, returning to Sahara, where many a libation was poured forth to the victor and his victory.

It was while at the Good Times Saloon that Derrick Mayfield saw his first fair chance, and at once improved it.

"May I have just a word or two in private with you, Mr. Clarkson?" he asked, gently touching an arm to draw notice his way.



"Of course you may," came the prompt reply, as the dandy gambler recognized the fellow who had served him so well that day. "Come into the other room, and I reckon you can talk without too many ears catching your words."

Derrick Mayfield brightened up perceptibly, for Clarkson was in an unexpectedly affable mood, so far as outward seeming went, and as soon as the wished-for privacy was secured, he at once began to free his mind of a troublesome burden.

"You haven't any particular fault to find with the manner in which I've performed my part to-day, have you, sir?" was his beginning.

"Just the contrary, sir: I owe you more than money can repay, but so far as that can cancel the obligation—"

Mayfield gave a slightly impatient gesture at this, which checked the hand then moving toward a hidden purse.

"Tisn't money, sir. I've got enough to worry along with, far as that goes. And if that was all I had to worry me, I'd never trouble you to help me over, when cards are so cheap!"

"You're lucky, pardner," said Clarkson, his lids drawing a bit closer together, which was always a sign with him of dawning suspicion. "If not that way, how can I repay you for your services?"

"Will you do it, if I point out a way, sir?" eagerly asked Mayfield.

"Would I be wise to promise, blindfold?"

The sport-at-large seemed a bit taken back by this cautious query, and for a brief space there was silence. Clarkson studied the face opposite his own. The owner of that face seemed pondering just how far his needs would justify him in confiding in the gambler.

This indecision lasted barely long enough to be perceptible, then he spoke again, with an air of half-reckless resolution:

"No, and I was a fool for thinking it, sir. But the fact is, I'm in what promises to become a mighty tight box, unless I can get solid backing from—well, I can't think of another I'd prefer to you!"

"All of which means—just what, my friend?"

"You're a sport. As such, of course you're hardly different from the rest of us, unless in degree; you're pretty high up the ladder, I know; still, you must have had your little downs, as well as your ups."

"That goes without saying, friend. But I'm waiting, still."

"So have I had mine; some of them pretty hard falls, and down as near bed-rock as an unlucky fellow could well get, too. That being so, and a man having to live after some fashion, it isn't so mighty odd that I couldn't *always* stay on the dead level, is it, sir?"

"In still plainer words, M y f i e l d ?"

"Well, since you *will* have the pure quill, I've known times when I just *had* to turn a bit crooked, to keep going. Understand?"

"I hear what you say, of course, but I'm not so sure I exactly catch your full meaning," came the cool, guarded response. "I reckon you'll save time by saying in plain words, just what you are trying to get at, pardner."

The fellow made a wry grimace, but then spoke out:

"Can I trust you, sir, with a secret which might set me to playing checkers with my nose for the only man?"

"If you like, yes. I don't ask your confidence, though, remember."

"But don't I tell you I need solid backing?" with a touch of sullen anger in his voice, lowered though it was kept. "And you're the only sport in this place that I have any claim upon; not that I'd make any such claim, mind you, if I could see my way clear to hoe my own row."

"I've already admitted that claim, Mayfield. I'll pay back the debt, if you show me how I can do so without breaking my own lucky streak," coldly said the gambler.

"Well, the fact is—I'm a hunted man!" confessed Derrick, leaning across the little table as he whispered, like one fearful of other and less friendly ears catching his words.

Clarkson frowned slightly, but that passed away on the instant, and his voice seemed more cordial as he gently asked:

"Who by, and what for?"

Derrick Mayfield gave a sickly grin before replying:

"As for just what for, I'm not quite sure, my own self. I've turned a considerable many of little tricks in my time, for a fact. The most of them wouldn't call for more than a few odd years' service, but one or two—Never mind, just now, if it's all the same to you, sir!"

"As I said before, pardner, I'm not trying to force your confidence. Tell me as much or as little as you see fit. Only, if I'm to be of any service, of course I ought to be posted, in part, at least."

Although he spoke with outward indifference, Clarkson was growing interested, and Mayfield was shrewd enough to see as much, despite that surface calm. And, no doubt, this perception gave him renewed courage to unbosom himself still further.

"I reckon it's for one of my bigger jobs, else they would hardly have gone to so much expense

and trouble. The fact is, there's one of the Pinkerton detectives right here in Sahara!"

"And you reckon he's here after you?"

"Well, it goes without saying that he's not here, so far from his regular beat, simply on a pleasure trip," said Mayfield, with a grin that was plainly forced for the occasion. "And if he isn't after me, why does he stick so infernally tight to my heels?"

"What?" ejaculated Clarkson, seemingly startled out of his calm by a sudden thought. "You can't mean—"

"But I do mean just him: Old Halcyon, or Dobbs, as he calls himself now, but whom I know in spite of his cunning disguise, to be Elmore Blakewood, one of Pinkertons' best hounds!"

Clarkson certainly exhibited interest deep enough to satisfy the most exacting, just then. Although he fought to conceal this, as best he could, one so shrewd in crooked ways as the sport-at-large could not escape taking mental note of the symptoms.

Either the dandy gambler felt an unusually deep interest in the welfare of his recently formed acquaintance, or else he had still deeper cause to feel an interest in the presence of a detective there.

"You are dead sure, pardner?" he asked, speaking slowly, the better to keep an unsteady voice from betraying him.

"Dead sure that Old Halcyon is a detective from Chicago. And if he isn't here after me, why is he sticking to me so mighty close? Why should he—"

Derrick Mayfield broke off abruptly as several men entered the gambling room, and without moving his lips sufficiently to attract attention, he whispered:

"Come outside with me, sir, where we can finish up our talk without fear of attracting attention. Will you?"

"Yes, since I've begun. Go out first, and wait for me."

Clarkson did not find it easy to win fairly clear of his friends at the bar, but before the sport-at-large grew weary of waiting for his coming, he succeeded in shaking off those too-cordial incumbrances, and joining his second, strolled in seeming carelessness along through town, talking the while.

If nothing else, that delay had enabled the gambler to fully recover his wonted composure, and he no longer betrayed what surely must have been a personal interest in the matter, unless all signs lied.

For some little time as they paced leisurely back and forth, Perry Clarkson fought a little shy, but possibly that was merely to force his present companion into more open speech, since he presently said:

"Well, my backing you up will depend a great deal on just what you expect me to do, pardner. Of course I'm willing to help you all I can, provided the doing so doesn't too openly expose my own hand."

"All I ask is for your aid in trapping the cursed bound, sir," Mayfield declared, with subdued earnestness in face and in voice. "Once I've got him fairly into my grip—well, I'd feel more like fighting you than giving thanks, were you to insist on going further!"

"Do you hate the fellow so badly, then?"

"No more than I'd hate any devil that was hunting my life, but that is hotly enough, be sure! So badly that I'll never let him report at Headquarters again, or pass in my own checks trying it on!"

Clarkson gave a low cruel chuckle at this. He seemed highly amused just now, and there was an abundance of truth in his next words:

"Well, I'll never hold your hand back, pardner, be sure! Still, it's rather risky work, even out here in this wooden country, letting out a life. Of course you've counted the chances, though?"

"I know that it's his croaking, or my scragging," sullenly growled the crook, in reply.

"And I'd rather go up a tree at the end of a rope, than drop through a trap with the same sort of necktie."

"I don't know as I blame you so mighty much, either, for I'd make the same choice for myself if it narrowed down to so fine a point. But as to your plans; of course you have shaped some such thing?"

Derrick Mayfield did not make immediate reply, but stood still, staring up the street toward a man who was slowly sauntering along, seemingly without paying attention to any one or any thing.

"Ware hawks, pardner!" hastily muttered Mayfield, with a nod in that direction. "He's smoking us, sure! See you later—ask for note at the Good Times, this evening!"

Then, without waiting for a reply, Mayfield hurried down the street.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### PLAYING A PART.

OLD HALCYON was startled by that faint, yet ardent question, but as he bore in mind the instructions given by Dr. Blakelock, he promptly made reply:

"Did ye down him, neighbor? Waal, I should re-mark!"

"He didn't—I killed him, then?"

"Killed him too turrible dead to skin, yes, sir!" Randall Keefe gave a low sigh as of intense relief, changed his position slightly, then sunk into what appeared to be a natural sleep.

Old Halcyon, who had some little experience in gun-shot wounds, was held in painful suspense for some little time, but after watching his patient closely for ten minutes or such a matter he too gave a relieving breath, settling back in his chair like one who knows a long vigil is before him, yet with a far more hopeful expression on his face than any he had worn since the rivals first faced each other in that duel to the death.

But Halcyon was not to keep his watch undisturbed. In fact, he had hardly satisfied himself that Keefe was quietly sleeping, rather than sinking into the lethargy which so often precedes death, when a guarded footstep sounded in the bare corridor without, and after a slight pause near the door of the chamber assigned to the wounded duelist, some one gently rapped against the barrier.

Silently as a cat, Old Halcyon stepped to the door, but as he opened it and recognized the author of that signal, an involuntary exclamation escaped his lips.

"You, is it? Then you baint no—ye surely be my brother!"

Derrick Mayfield shook his head in denial, yet with nothing of the anger which he had showed on prior occasions. And in lower tones, he hurriedly spoke:

"No, but it may be that I can set you on his track, if you'll let me in long enough to—"

"Not ef you was ten thousand brothers, all rolled into a heap o' one!" sternly interposed Old Halcyon, stepping outside and drawing the door to behind him, the better to shut out all noise. "Thar's a precious life in yender, jest ready fer to flicker out like a candle, ef any stray breath—"

"I know, and I'd be just as deeply grieved as you would, sir, to have worse harm befall Mr. Keefe. Of course you can hardly be expected to believe just that, but if I had a fair chance—can't you leave him for a few minutes, sir? I really must have a private talk with you, and this is the first opening I've been able to catch."

Dim though the light was there in the long passage, it revealed a gravely yearning look upon the face of the wanderer, as he gazed steadily into the face before him.

"Ef I knowed—is the finger of the good Father, up above, softenin' that hardened heart, Philo? Is somethin' of the old days when—"

"I tell you, sir, I am not the man you think me, but since I've had time for thought, it seems as though I ought to know—I can almost take oath I've met this lost relative of yours, sir—"

"When an' whar, Philo?" asked Old Halcyon, yet betraying his unbelief by his use of that name.

Derrick Mayfield gave an irritable gesture at that detected name, but the point he was trying to win was of far too much importance for him to risk losing all, merely to indulge his temper.

"That comes later, and not at all, unless you can give me a better chance to explain myself, sir. Will you do this much?"

Old Halcyon hesitated briefly, but then spoke: "I'm on duty byar, an' ef I was to desert my post, an' more hurt should come of it, how could I face—"

"Will you give me a little talk, then, if I can get you a relief?"

Before an answer could be given, Alva Moody came tip-toeing up the stairs, and Old Halcyon instantly reached a conclusion.

"He's sleepin' like a tired kitten, neighbor, but 'twon't do fur to leave him by his lonesome, jest yit. But ef it *could* be fixed—"

"There's a bit of important business for us to arrange, sir," interposed Mayfield, earnestly. "Can't you relieve our good friend long enough for—say an hour at the outside?"

"Of course I can, for that's just what I was coming up to see about, gentlemen," promptly responded the landlord. "I've put a sub in the office, Mr. Dobbs, and there's a hot supper ready for your teeth down below. Do it full justice, please, and both wife and I'll feel more than happy."

Halcyon promptly expressed his thanks, and repeating the orders left by Dr. Blakelock, turned his charge over to Moody, passing down to the lower floor in company with the sport-at-large.

"How long will it take you to eat supper?" asked Mayfield, striving in vain to disguise his impatience at another probable delay.

"I've dono ett my grub, sir, an' ef I bedn't, 'twouldn't be a mess o' warm chuck as'd keep me back—from hearin' news consarnin' my other half, which—but I *can't* quite git over it that you're Philo! I jest somehow *can't*, now!"

With an eagerness which he made no attempt to disguise, Derrick Mayfield led the way outside, making use of the semi-private door, rather than call attention to their movements by passing through the office.

As they struck the unpaved street, he slipped a hand through Old Halcyon's arm, as though afraid of being given the slip even now.

With a faint, peaceful sigh, the Stranger



Within the Gates yielded to that touch, walking slowly along, his eyes dreamily gazing at the bright stars, his thoughts seemingly far away.

"Philo—mother—home!" he breathed softly. "So terrible fur, yit them same stars is a-shinin' down on all two both on 'em!"

"That's all right, if you find pleasure or profit in sticking to a played-out game," bluntly broke in Mayfield, coming to a halt, yet retaining his hold upon that arm.

"En? I don't—Philo?"

"I'm not Philo. I'm not your brother. I have my doubts whether you ever had a twin-brother," deliberately said the other.

"Never had—"

"Wait, please, until I have had my say out. Of course I can't exactly swear that you are playing a part, but I firmly believe you are."

"Lawsee! Playin' a part? Why fer should you think that way?"

"Never mind my reasons in detail; enough that they are sufficient to make me doubt whether you ever had a brother—"

"Stop, please," interrupted Old Halcyon, with stern gravity. "That's pritty much the same as callin' me a liar, but I kin 'ford to overlook that part of it. But when you come to say I never had a brother, why, I've got to call ye down! Ef you felt that way, how could ye 'gree to tell me how an' whar I might find my 'tther half?"

"I was wrong in saying so much," frankly admitted Mayfield. "When I sought you out, I didn't intend going quite that far."

"Then you was lyin' to me? You done it jest to ketch me out whar I'd be by my lonesome? What reason, neighbor?"

Gravely came these words, but Halcyon made no effort to free his arm, and certainly showed no signs of personal fear.

"I thank you for taking it so easily, sir, and if ever the chance offers itself, I'll do my level best to make ample amends. But the simple facts are like this:

"I'm here, a stranger in town, with a contract on my hands which is rather too heavy for my managing alone."

"Then—you really hain't Philo Dobbs?"

"I really am not Philo Dobbs. I never heard that name before you mentioned it last night. I never saw the original of the picture you put into my hands when you gave me that kindly warning."

Halcyon shrunk perceptibly, much as one might on receipt of a bitter blow; but he rallied just as quickly.

"Nur you cain't even tell me whar I might meet up with the pore boy, sir? Think of his old mother—an' while I'm wanderin' through the dark night o' blind ignorance, she may be dyin', cheated out o' the mother-hope that hes held her livin' so many years!"

There was a brief silence, broken by Derrick Mayfield, his tones a bit softened.

"I may have been wrong, friend, but I thought you were playing a part, just as I frankly admit I have been doing. Was I mistaken in that belief?"

"I wish't you hed bin neighbor," gloomily mumbled Old Halcyon. "I wish't I could throw off this weary burden which—even yit I cain't sca'cely make it come true that I've bin fooled! I've felt it into the bones o' me so terrible strong! Somethin' kept punchin' me on, an' a-sayin' *thar he is, now!* Don't let him slip ye ag'in! Freeze fast to him, fer the dyin' mother needs her lost baby-boy!"

Derrick Mayfield frowned, and felt like adding an oath. Still, he had far too much at stake to throw away a chance which might be saved, and smothering his real doubts, stronger now than ever, he spoke again:

"Tell you what I'll do, friend. You lend me a hand now, and when my trick is fairly turned, I'll help you in whatever you ask. Isn't that a fair offer?"

"Sounds like it, onto the face of it," slowly admitted Old Halcyon. "But sence you fooled me once, what's to hinder your foolin' me some more, when thar hain't nothin' more left fer you to gain?"

"I'll answer that question, friend, after I've shown you just how and why I need the assistance of a hearty helper like yourself," said Mayfield, gently forcing Old Halcyon onward, talking as they went.

"Of course I wouldn't dare make so clean a breast of it, if I didn't feel positive you are an honest fellow at heart. Even if you decline to lend me a helping hand, I feel confident you will not betray my dangerous secrets to—"

"Ef they're so dangerous, neighbor, I'd ruther a heap you'd keep 'em safe in your own holdin'," quickly interposed Old Halcyon. "I've got more'n enough to bother me, huntin' fer what I'm comin' to think won't never be found this side o' eternity!"

"I've said too much, not to say more, sir," sharply uttered Mayfield, resolved to carry out the plan he had shaped in his mind. "I am a detective, then, and I came here to Sahara in pursuit of a red-handed criminal!"

"Lawsee—ohsee!" ejaculated the wanderer, in awed tones.

"Wait, and hear me through, please. As I said, I'm on a dangerous trail, for there's death ahead! If not for me, through being discovered by the guilty wretch before I can fairly trap him, then for him, when the law can take its regular course."

"I have tracked my game to this town. He has surrounded himself with many friends, who would not hesitate a moment about taking my life if that was necessary to rescue their comrade."

"For this reason, I dare not attempt an open arrest, but with one good man to help me, I believe I can trap him, without a blow being struck."

#### CHAPTER XVIII.

##### BAITING THE TRAP.

DERRICK MAYFIELD paused for a moment, as though expecting word or exclamation, but Old Halcyon said nothing, merely gazing fixedly into that heavily bearded face by what dim light the twinkling stars afforded them.

Even yet he seemed unable to comprehend the truth: that this man whom he had claimed as a long lost brother, was merely a stranger, and that his weary pursuit of a phantom hope must begin afresh!

So, at least, it seemed to Derrick Mayfield as he gazed keenly into that face which bore more than a slight resemblance to his own. But he was none the less firmly assured that he, too, was playing a cunning part, even after seeing his disguise had been penetrated.

"Are you dreaming, man?" he asked, irritably, giving Old Halcyon a little shake at the same time.

"Dreamin'? Ef I hain't— Not him! An' I felt so happy-sure! An' I tuck it Heaven—Whar's the pictur' I give you, then?" with a touch of anger leaping into his voice, although his voice retained the same guarded level set by Mayfield.

"The picture?" echoed Derrick, taken by surprise for the instant.

"Yes. The pictur' I writ a warnin' onto, when I see you was bein' cheated by that dug-gun critter who— It's the onliest one I've got, neighbor, an' the on'y glimpse we ever hed o' brother Philo after he run away an' got growed up to the bigness of a man. I cain't 'ford to lose it now, fer time may come when—"

"He has it?"

"Who's he? An' why did ye let him? Who's he, I ax ye, sir?"

"Perry Clarkson, the very man I'm asking your help to trap for an outraged law to fitly punish!" rapidly whispered Mayfield.

For a brief space Old Halcyon stood like one petrified, as well he might be. With the memory of poor Ran Keefe flashing across his brain, it is hardly to be wondered at if he felt revengeful, and strongly tempted to employ this man's secret in playing even with the gambler.

"He's a dirty whelp, or he'd never 'a' downed pore Keefe that-a-way! He ketched him off his guard, an' shot him down as I wouldn't shoot a sheep-killin' cur!"

Derrick Mayfield greedily caught at his chance, and spoke again:

"Help me down him, then, and so play even for your friend! Will you agree to that? Will you help me, and justice, and at the same time pay off Keefe's private scores?"

Old Halcyon drew back a pace, with a gesture of repugnance.

"S'arve him so? That'd look mighty nigh as though it hed bin tore off the same dirty bolt o' cloth; now wouldn't it, neighbor?"

"Not when you stop to think what he has done to merit punishment."

"What hes he done, that's so terrible bad? Meanin' what come afore his doin's to-day, of course, sir?"

Derrick Mayfield cast a wary glance around, making sure no one was near, and that they were free from espial. Then, drawing nearer the mountain tramp, he whispered again:

"He's been guilty of pretty near every crime mentioned in the decalogue, I imagine, even if he hasn't invented a few more, just to keep his hands from growing moss through idleness! But what I'm trailin' him for is murder!"

"It's been nearly two years since the crime was committed, but it was atrocious enough to remain fresh a great deal longer; surely you haven't forgotten the killing of Arthur Stanley Jones, of Chicago?"

"Never heard tell of him nur it," declared Old Halcyon, slowly.

"Well, the man who now calls himself Perry Clarkson, committed that crime, and I am here to arrest him. I have played my cards patiently, and run no slight risks while feeling my way. Only for this important object, you would never have found me opposed to you as I have been: I lack just one important clew, which I saw no other means of picking up."

"I found that missing link last night, thanks to the trust I won from the rascal, through taking his side and agreeing to do his dirty work. Can't you understand, now?"

"Mebbe yes, mebbe no," evasively answered Old Halcyon. "Pears like you was takin' a turribly roundy-bout road, don't it?"

"Because I know that to make a single mistake will almost surely cost me my life," earnestly explained Mayfield. "Let me explain a bit more fully just what sort of a devil this man is, and I think you will come nearer agreeing with me that caution is strictly necessary."

"Arthur Stanley Jones was one of Chicago's rich men, and he seemed pretty nearly the last man on earth to be duped by even the most cunning swindler; still, he fell a victim to the one known in Sahara as Perry Clarkson."

"To this day there is something of mystery surrounding the case, and only the major details are known to the police. Still, this much is perfectly clear: Jones was decoyed to Detroit, with a large sum of ready money on his person, presumably expecting to make a fortunate investment of some description."

"Instead, he was found dead, two bullet-holes through his skull."

"He had been missing for nearly two weeks, and had been dead more than half that length of time when found, according to the doctors."

"During that absence, nearly a dozen checks, made payable to bearer, and all for large sums, bearing the signature of Arthur Stanley Jones, had been presented to Chicago banks, and paid without hesitation. Each check bore the private mark which Jones always used when drawing on his bank."

"Of course a hot hunt was begun at once, and a score seeming clews were carefully followed up, each one ending in disappointment. The case bade fair to become on a par with the famous Nathan murder; but when the Pinkertons took it up, they vowed never to relax their efforts until the murderer was run down and brought to justice."

"It is pretty nearly a year, now, since they got hold of the first actual clew, and though the trail was so cold, they followed it through all its windings, into and out of Canada, through a dozen or more States, at times meeting a balk for weeks, but always striking the scent again."

"It would take all night to give you anything like a fair idea of the many difficulties they overcame, but without you were in the profession, you could not understand, even if you could enjoy."

"Waal, mebbe that's so," gravely assented Old Halcyon. "Pears like it mought be turribly excitin', this man-huntin', but I don't perress to know through my own 'sperience, nur be I so pesky sart'in I'd keer to try it on! An' yit—but you hain't Philo, so it don't matter!"

He heaved a dolorous sigh, and with a hidden sneer, Derrick Mayfield resumed his narrative.

"I didn't intend resurrecting that ghost, I assure you, Mr. Dobbs! And so, to cut the matter short, I'll just say this: I'm a detective, and I was detailed to follow one of the several clews which, nearly two months ago, began to bother my employers most sorely."

"That clew, painfully worked out, brought me to Sahara, and at last I have found my man! Perry Clarkson is the man who murdered Arthur Stanley Jones! And if you will agree to lend me your help, I'll trap the rascal, and run him out of town before any of his friends can so much as suspect the peril which menaces their chum!"

"Of course, by powers given me, I might command your assistance, but I greatly prefer a volunteer aid; the only question remaining is, will you lend me a helping hand?"

Derrick Mayfield paused for an answer, with poorly concealed eagerness. Old Halcyon was in no particular haste to give this, and when he did speak, there only came the helpless words:

"But—how kin I help, sir?"

The self-admitted detective gave a short, low laugh, which sounded far too grimly vindictive to be pleasant hearing.

"Easily enough, if you will consent to follow the lead I've already marked out for the game to take, Mr. Dobbs. Listen closely, so that I'll not have to waste precious time in repetition, and I reckon you'll soon see how I count on turning the trick."

"You already know what I've done to win the good-will of Clarkson. It went strongly against the grain, of course, but I had to make my last point sure, and I could only do that by gaining his perfect confidence."

"I drove the first nail in his coffin, to-day, after the duel. I got Clarkson apart from his friends, and told him a daisy fairy-tale: I can hardly keep from roaring even now, as I recall how greedily he swallowed the bait I offered!"

"Ef time is so mighty precious, hain't you spendin' a turrible lot of it, 'thout any real need, pardner?" meekly asked Halcyon.

"You're right, friend, and I'll bite my words off shorter. And so, as one sport confiding in another of about the same caliber, I begged Clarkson to hearken unto my tale of woe—understand?"

"I made a clean breast for his especial benefit. I confessed that I was a full-fledged crook, and that a Pinkerton man was here in town, almost certainly hunting for my scalp!"

"Which wasn't jest the truth, I don't reckon?"

"Not exactly," with a little chuckle. "Still, I wasn't sticking at one lie, more or less, for the sake of catching my sucker, you understand?"



"Oh, go on, ef you don't want me to go off!" retorted Milo Dobbs.

"Go on it is, so listen! I made Clarkson believe you were the detective I feared, and I told him your name was Elmore Blakewood, from the Chicago agency. And when I mentioned that, you ought to have seen him shiver in his boots! I knew why: he fancied you were *after him* on the old Detroit score!"

"Then I proposed that he help me in trapping you, without letting any other person in Sahara drop to the little racket. He jumped at the chance, and if you'll only fall in with my plans for an hour or so, I'll make the biggest haul of the century, and you'll come in for a fair proportion of the heavy rewards offered by the relatives of the murdered man. See?"

"I reckon I begin to ketch on, but—to put it calmly, sir—I don't jest like the way it smells," gravely declared Halcyon. "I'm willin' fer to help you 'rest the critter, sence he deserves it so peskily, but I don't like to play the snake; it's too creepy an' sneaky to suit my feelin's, an' that's a fact, now!"

"That would never answer!" almost harshly retorted Mayfield, possibly fearing his efforts were about to result in failure, after all. "I'd arrest him openly and above board, if I thought there was even half a chance to get him safely out of town. But I knew better!"

"Thar's a powerful heap o' white men in Sahara, sir, an' they'd back ye up in doin' of your sworn duty, let 'em once know the rights of it all," earnestly argued Old Halcyon.

"Look ye here," urged Mayfield, earnestly. "I'll make a fair bargain with you, rather than lose your help. Will you bear me out, Dobbs?"

## CHAPTER XIX.

### HALCYON CONSENTS.

"WAAL, neighbor, I reckon that partly 'pends on how long it'll take us to come to a trade," answered Old Halcyon. "Fer one thing, I can't well stay out all night, 'long of bein' on watch, don't ye see?"

"The evening is early, yet, and if you'll agree, we can get the whole job over, long before your relief-watch finds his eyes growing heavy."

"Not unless you kin talk straighter then you've bin a-doin'."

"Here you have it, then, short if not exactly sweet. Help me bag my game, and if I can't prove to you that he is guilty of all I charge, I will turn him loose and take the full penalty. You shall be sole judge of the case. Can I make a fairer offer?"

"Not ef it's a ginewine one, sir."

"If not genuine, can't you easily turn the tables on me? I'll have my hands full with the fellow—for I'll take him alive, myself—and what more easy than for you to jump on my back with both feet?"

Apparently this blunt reasoning was conclusive, for Old Halcyon no longer hesitated, grasping Mayfield's hand and shaking it heartily as he ejaculated:

"It's a whack! 'Cordin' to that 'rangement, it's a solid whack!"

Derrick Mayfield made no attempt to conceal his strong satisfaction at having so nearly carried his main point, but hand-shaking did not prevent their tongues from moving, glibly as ever.

"I'll help ye out, 'long's you run it 'cordin' to rule, neighbor, but that's the next which I'm wonderin' over: how's it to come so?"

"Easily enough, pardner, when you recall what I more than hinted at a little bit ago: Perry Clarkson is red-hot to help me down you, and by making him think we're luring you into a trap, don't you see, it'll be almost too easy, our rakin' him in!"

"Sounds that-a-way, to hear you tell it, fer a fact," slowly admitted Old Halcyon. "But, mebbe so, thar's others kin come the double-cross pritty nigh as slick! Ef so—"

"If so, I'll be the one to suffer, not you," bluntly interrupted the sport-at-large. "Mind, I'm not asking or even wishing you to take an active part in capturing my man. I'll have the glory, or the loss. I want you more for a witness than anything else; and after the capture is made, to help me get the fellow safely away from town, through the hills, far enough away from here so I can lie in wait with my game to intercept the east-bound stage, to-morrow."

Old Halcyon stood in silence for a brief space, thoughtfully combing his heavy beard with bent fingers; the action seemed habitual with him whenever busily reflecting.

Derrick Mayfield watched him closely, evidently longing for some definite reply, but afraid to betray too great impatience lest that lose rather than gain his point.

"Waal, I'll help ye out, neighbor, ef I kin git away from the sick lad. When'll it be the right time, though?"

"To-night, of course. Why not let the other fellow watch—"

"Bec'ase he'll be lookin' fer me back in the little while I said, an' it's 'cordin' to a rule o' mine not to never fail a mortal bein' which is treatin' me white, an' showin' the trust one gentleman ought to show to 'nother."

"But, you will not fail me, then?"

"Not ef it's in the wood, I won't, neighbor. Ef I kin git away, I'll help ye turn the trick. Ef I can't this night, I'll leave a note fer you at the hotel office: jest drap in thar when you're good an' ready fer me, an' you'll know which is what, I reckon."

Derrick Mayfield looked as though he could wish matters different, but lest he mar, in place of mending, he agreed to that understanding.

Just as they were on the point of parting, Halcyon, yielding to the impulse against which he had been fighting, caught that hand once more, gripping it almost feverishly, to huskily say:

"Ef you make this raffle, through my helpin' of ye, sir, reckon I'll l'arn anythin' 'bout my other half?"

"If Perry Clarkson knows anything concerning Philo Dobbs, of course I'll help you to force a confession from his lips," Mayfield assented.

"An' you—stop!" dropping that hand, to make a swift gesture. "I was wrong. Don't say it now, but try to think of pore lone mother, 'way back home! Try to pictur' her as she shorally is, unless the good father up yen-ways hes tuck pity onto her an' called her home to the rest which she bain't felt nur knowed on airth, these many a long an' weary year!"

"Try to think of her, I say, jest kep' livin' through a wish to hev back him as she can't think of 'cept as her baby boy! Think of her, blind an' crippled, layin' thar prayin', hopin', longin', waitin', a livin' death in life! Think, I bid ye, man, and then—"

Old Halcyon turned abruptly away from his companion of the hour, leaving that adjuration incomplete, hurrying off in the direction of the hotel, like one unable to trust his own emotions further.

And Derrick Mayfield?

He stood looking after that rapidly receding figure, now little better than a shadow under the starlight. In place of being affected by that earnest outburst, there was a cold sneer upon his face, and a touch of malicious scorn in his mutterings:

"You play it mighty fine, cully, even yet, but it's no use; you're a detective, out here on a blood-scent!"

He watched until even that shadow was lost to his keen eyes, then turned his own way, adding a few words to his soliloquy which would hardly have enchanted Old Halcyon could his ears have caught them.

"After big game, eh? Well, my very dear friend, both can't well win! And I'm bound to get there!"

Mayfield betrayed a pretty fair knowledge of Sahara for a man who had so recently "struck the town" as he claimed to have done, for he proceeded directly to the Good Times establishment, which was once more doing business, though still showing signs of rough usage.

Matters were far more quiet in the saloon division than they had been on the preceding evening, and no one spoke to Mayfield as he passed through, pausing at the curtained archway for a searching glance down the long apartment where three tables were surrounded by the votaries of Fortune, apparently forgetful of the exciting events which had so recently taken place within those walls.

A single glance told Mayfield his man was not among those playing, but then he caught sight of him, seated in company with Marshal Gilmore and Harry Trefoil, the proprietor of the establishment, at a little card-table across the room.

A grim smile lit up his face as he saw this, and he inwardly muttered the fancy which struck him:

"Folks give 'em as wide a berth as though they were packages of dynamite! And, to tell the truth, I reckon there isn't much difference, so far as danger goes!"

But there was nothing of this hardly flattering opinion to be seen on his face as Derrick Mayfield passed under the arch, making his way quietly toward that particular group, all so silently as to draw no attention his way from either players or spectators.

But Perry Clarkson was keenly upon the alert, and from the manner in which his really handsome face lighted up at sight of the fellow, there could be no doubt as to his expecting just such a coming.

A warning word must have notified his present mates, for both Trefoil and Gilmore turned their heads for a glance in that direction, and each moved his chair slightly in order to make room, as Clarkson spoke up, briskly:

"Just the fellow I was longin' most to see! Come, pardner, take a sit-down, and—how goes it with him, man?"

The conclusion came in lowered tones, plainly intended only for that particular group, and in similar tones Mayfield made his reply:

"Good or bad, pretty much according to the side you view it from, gentlemen. Of course I couldn't well insist on making a personal examination of the patient, but there's no doubt he's in a mighty bad way. He's caught his last sickness, I'm pretty certain!"

"You actually saw him, then?" asked Clarkson, with poorly concealed eagerness. "You didn't simply take it on trust?"

"I saw him, yes," quietly admitted Mayfield.

"Only a glimpse, as that queer old crack-brain

answered my rap, but if ever I saw the brand of speedy death, I saw it upon that white face!"

Perry Clarkson appeared not a little relieved by this grave statement, for he leaned back in his seat, his lungs filling with a long, free breath.

Jacob Gilmore smiled grimly, thus belying his words:

"Pity, too! Take him by-an'-large, Ran Keefe was a good lad. His croakin' will leave a hole right hyar, which won't be so turrible easy fer to fill up ag'in, now I'm tellin' ye!"

"He brought it down upon his own head," coldly said Clarkson. "It was him or me, after last night. You know that, gentlemen?"

"Of course," assented Trefoil. "He knew as much, too, else he'd never have drawn blade and tossed away the sheath as he surely did. Still, I'm sorry the row begun under my roof, and still more sorry it didn't spring from a sweeter root!"

"Is that a slur for my especial benefit, Trefoil?"

"Not unless you're spoiling for another racket, pardner," was the grave response. "I'm simply stating a fact. You come out on top of the heap, of course, as luck would have it; but you'll have to make up your mind to put up with a good many little hints and remarks, by the side of which my speech, just now, will be a bouquet of glory!"

"I'll know how to answer all such, I reckon."

"Well, let that flea stick by the wall. About this other fellow: Old Halcyon, as he calls himself: who and what is he?"

"A crack-brained crank, I'm thinking," volunteered Mayfield.

"He'll ketch a cracked brain ef he don't kerry himself mighty straight, I'm tellin' ye!" grunted Gilmore, viciously. "He makes me feel sick, jest to hear him whine!"

The ghost of a smile flitted across that peculiar face, but Trefoil contented himself with saying:

"Well, of course I may be doing the fellow a wrong by so regarding him, but I really believe he'll bear inspecting a bit more closely. You ought to look up his pedigree, marshal. If it's straight, so much the better for him. If crooked—well, there's a remedy provided for just such patients, don't you think?"

Mayfield and Clarkson interchanged covert glances at this, as though the conversation was taking a turn hardly agreeable to either. And the gambler abruptly rose to his feet, saying:

"Well, so long as the fellow keeps out of my path, I'll never step aside to bother him! Now, reckon I'll be moving, gents. I got precious little sleep last night, and my winkers are beginnin' to feel smoky."

But as he moved away from the table in company with Trefoil and Gilmore, a slip of paper dropped at Mayfield's side.

## CHAPTER XX.

### A CONFIDENT SCHEMER.

As though on the watch for something of the sort, that bit of paper had hardly touched the floor before Mayfield covered it with one of his feet. And when he could do so without attracting attention from either of Clarkson's companions, he picked the paper up, quickly noting the few pencil-marks thereon:

"Follow, and wait for me."

Only that, scratched down under cover of the table at which they had been sitting, but it was enough: a volume could not have served better.

Slipping the paper into his pocket, Mayfield arose, moving carelessly toward the archway, under which the trio had already passed.

They were leaning against the bar, taking a friendly glass, but appeared not to notice that quietly moving figure, and Mayfield passed through the saloon to the front, stepping out under the stars.

He crossed the street, turning where the shadows lay deepest, watching the open doorway opposite.

His patience was not tried for long. Clarkson, apparently bent on carrying out the intention hinted at in the gambling hall, parted from his friends, and left the saloon alone.

He lifted a hand as though to wipe his lips, but gave a signal which Mayfield instantly recognized as an invitation to follow in silence until a more favorable spot was reached.

As though shod with velvet, Mayfield followed the dandy gambler out of sight of any person leaving the Good Times, and was on hand when Clarkson turned to greet him.

"Right after you, pardner," he said, quietly stepping forward. "If I'd been on the make, to-night, reckon I could have given you the crook, or let you feel a sandbag—just as easy!"

"Maybe yes, maybe not," retorted the other. "I knew you were following me, though I'll do you credit so far: I'd rather have you as a pal than an adversary, of a dark night like this!"

"It's all practice, you know," observed Derrick. "If I wanted to make a haul, reckon I could walk over a pavement of ripe eggs, without cracking a shell! And I'm hardly a feather-weight, either!"

"Never mind: that don't count. Is it business, or a fizzle?"

"Not a fizzle, if you'll only help me make it a



shot, sir," quickly answered Mayfield. "Shall I spit it all out, here, or would it be safer to get where there isn't quite so much chance for a soft-footed spy to creep up nigh enough to have his ears tickled?"

"Maybe that'll be wisest," admitted Clarkson, with a swift, half-nervous glance around them.

"Will I take the lead, then, or would you rather?"

"I will. Follow me, but not too closely. The less often we're seen in company, if that sort of trick is to be turned, the better I'll like it. No slur against you, of course, though!"

"Don't mention it, sir," with a dry chuckle. "My hide is too tough for a weenty flea-bite like that to leave a smart behind."

Without cutting further time to waste, Perry Clarkson stepped out at a brisk pace, heading for Sahara's most noted "monument," a lightning-blasted tree which stood on the eastern outskirts, from whose few stout limbs more than one ghastly bunch of "human fruit" had swayed in the night breeze since the camp was first organized.

This tree stood on a slight knoll, surrounded on all sides by barren ground, affording not a particle of cover which could be utilized for an ambushade, or by one bent on playing eaves-dropper.

Reaching this point, Clarkson turned, to be speedily rejoined by Mayfield, who gave a nod of approval as he glanced around the spot.

"A good selection, sir. Couldn't be better if made to order!"

"That's all right. Get down to business, please. How is it: what luck did you have?"

"Better than fair, although everything isn't quite settled, as yet."

"What's lacking?"

"Little more than pulling the string which'll close the bag. The fellow tried to fight shy, at first, but I struck to my knitting until I filled his eyes full of dust."

"Unless he was fooling you!"

"I'll risk that. I've got too much at stake to make such a mistake as that would prove. *He's my meat*, just as surely as though I had him right under my knife this holy second!"

There came a wicked flash of steel whisking through the air, and Clarkson sprang nimbly back, both hands dropped to his guns, for the moment fancying Mayfield was aiming at his life.

"Not a bit of it, pardner," chuckled the fellow, divining the cause of that swift movement. "It's not for you, but just a sample of the way I'm going to 'cyarve dat 'possum!"

"Well, don't swing around quite so loosely, my friend, or you may catch your own dose," reproved the gambler, covering his short-lived alarm as well as he was able. "Put up that carver, or I'll take it for granted you're after me, rather than Dobbs."

"Beg pardon, sir, I'm sure," apologized Mayfield, putting up his weapon like one abashed. "I couldn't help it, though! When I think of that merciless devil, trailing me so far, meaning to hang me—ugh!"

"Never mind. Time is passing. You say you've arranged to spring your trap, with my help? What part do you expect me to play?"

"Nothing, unless he should prove too heavy for my handling, sir," was the prompt reply. "I've already used your name as the bait, and that was the most I needed you for."

"Then you've hauled me, clear out here, just for nothing?"

"No, sir. I want you to be on hand, and ready to lend a hand in case he gives me more than I can easily manage. Of course I'll polish him off, in the end. I wouldn't share *that* job with my own brother!"

"How do you propose to cover over your tracks, though? Human blood talks mighty loud, sometimes!"

"I've thought that all out, too. I'll finish the dog, then clap on what's left, the mark of the Six Sinners of Sabara!"

Perry Clarkson seemed fated to receive a good many little shocks, that evening, and now he gave another start, ejaculating:

"The Six Sinners! What do you know about them, man?"

"Never a bit more than you do, sir," promptly answered Derrick, with a grin which was perceptible even under that uncertain light. "What harm can it do to turn the light that way, though?"

Clarkson did not reply, though he shifted somewhat uneasily on his feet. Evidently he hardly liked the idea, yet felt at a loss how to name his objections.

"Of course, cully, if you seriously object to that, I'll throw it over, though I really think a cuter scheme couldn't well be worked."

"Unless common report tells thundering big lies, it wouldn't be the first time the Six Sinners have offered just such samples to the public, and surely one more dose can't greatly harm their record?"

"Of course not," said Clarkson, rallying his nerves. "Only—it may set the gang working to learn just who has been infringing on their patent, don't you see?"

"Let 'em search, then! If the hunt comes too much my way for comfort, I'll just drop 'em

Blakewood's real pedigree, and that'll be loud enough to satisfy them some one has done a mighty good bit of work in their interest. Don't you see?"

"Yes, and I'm coming 'round to your view of the matter," declared Clarkson. "Of course any such trick will kick up a mighty lively racket on all hands, but *that* brand will let us both out."

"Just the way my brain argued, don't you see?" chuckled Mayfield, shrewdly. "Those mysterious fellows can better afford to bear the brunt, if only because there'll be less volunteers to look for cause."

"Well, let it go at that. Now, just when is it to come off?"

"That's the only part lacking," admitted Mayfield. "I'll have to run over to the hotel, after my man, but I know he'll be ready. I gave him such a big dose, that he'll be more than eager for another."

"You will play decoy, of course. I'll see Old Halcyon, to give him the title he seems to like best, then let you know—where at?"

"The Good Times, say?"

"All right; Good Times be it!"

"Shan't I speak to a couple or three solid lads whom I can trust fully?" suggested Clarkson, as an afterthought. "Nothing like making a dead sure thing of it, you know."

"But there's such a thing as letting too many into a secret, and this is of a sort I'd rather keep as nearly as possible to myself. I don't fear *you'll* leak, and I know *I'll* not. Could I go bail for two or three others?"

"I could, but have it your own way pardner."

A few more sentences passed between the schemers, but as the ground has been sufficiently covered already, there is no particular necessity for lengthening out the record.

Hardly an hour later than that parting beneath the lightning-blasted tree in the open, the death-trap was completed, and the unsuspecting victim was walking blindly into the snare which he had been arranging for another.

No other person in all Sahara paid any attention to the persons who left town, going toward the east, where the rocky hills gradually sloped down to blend with the level.

The spot was carefully selected for that dread purpose.

From a few straggling shrubs growing beyond the barren tract about the blasted tree, the growth increased in density and luxuriance, forming cover sufficiently extensive to give a regiment shelter.

One coming from town, without fear of evil brewing for himself, might come squarely upon even a host of enemies lying hidden there, without the slightest premonition of danger until the death-trap was fairly sprung—and then it would be eternally too late!

Toward the selected spot two shadowy figures were stealing, coming from Sahara, the busy hum of distant voices following them as though a far away swarm of bees were taking their airy circles.

Only occasional guarded words were spoken, for there was nothing more to arrange; the doomed man fancied everything was working, smoothly, and that failure, so far as he was concerned, might as well be numbered among the impossibilities.

"Careful, now!" muttered one of the twain as they came to the edge of the bushes. "Leave no signs which can talk too loud, when the town wakes up to-morrow!"

There was no reply. Everything seemed safely arranged, and then—

Without a sound to warn the death-doomed unfortunate, the signal was given, and the dastardly trap was sprung upon its victim!

## CHAPTER XXI.

### THE SYNONOMY OF SIX.

THE long, narrow, odd-corned and low-celled apartment, was lighted by lamps the shades of which represented fleshless skulls. Through the eyeless sockets, the ear-cavities, and the grinning jaws, came rays red as freshly shed blood, while the opaque shade itself emitted but a dim, ghastly white glow.

This was the first peculiarity noted by the man who stood so helplessly there, knowing right well that his death had surely been decreed, yet with nerve sufficient to wait in stern silence, and while waiting to take note of his surroundings.

That peculiarly shaped apartment was draped in black, relieved only by those grim lamps. Yonder the grewsome emblems—skull and cross-bones.

Directly in front of where he was standing, rested an object as yet covered with a sable cloth. Its outlines could be little more than guessed at, yet he who looked knew without asking: 'twas a coffin!

Despite his nerve, the prisoner averted his eyes with an involuntary shiver.

"For me! Ready and waiting to receive my corpse!"

So flashed the conviction through his brain, and as he strove to regain his shaken nerve, the doomed man's eyes gave him yet another shock: that oddly-shaped room was only an exaggerated

copy of what he felt lay hidden beneath that sable pall: *already he was in a coffin!*

A cry rose in his throat, but he smothered it before his sudden horror could fully betray itself. He made one fierce effort to burst his bonds, but finding that worse than vain, he ceased, silently fighting to regain the stern courage which was his sole aid now.

All around him had been deathlike silence, and to all seeming he had been left unguarded, unwatched, ever since being ironed to that upright post, firmly planted in the ground, painted a blood-red hue.

Yet instinct told him he was being closely watched, and as his sole satisfaction, he had resolved to betray neither fright nor amaze, and thus lessen the unholy triumph of his deadly enemies as much as might be. Poor consolation, surely! Yet none better remained.

Even as these reflections were passing through his mind, his eyesight was suddenly shut off, by a thick hood or cowl of woolen being drawn over his head, down to his neck.

There had not been a sound to warn him of what was coming, nor did he catch so much as a glimpse of the being who had blinded him so swiftly.

Then, helpless save to strain his ears in listening, the death-doomed man knew his enemies were stirring about him, but he could only vaguely surmise what was being done.

If he could have been left the use of his eyes! That was the sorest trial of all: his blindness!

But the doomed detective's magnificent nerve proved equal to the test, and in grim silence he waited the end.

Then the blinding hood was snatched from over his head, and he was at liberty to use his eyes once more.

He saw that the coffin-chamber had been invaded by a number of beings clothed in black robes from head to foot, leaving not a glimpse of their real persons visible. Even their hands were gloved with the same somber material.

One shapeless shape was seated on a slightly raised dais, at the end of the apartment toward which he was facing. On his broad breast glowed the white skull and cross-bones.

One swift glance the doomed man swept around him, and as he mentally noted the number of black-gowned figures, he knew the terrible truth.

*He was in the presence of the Secret Six!*

The one seated on the dais now rose to his feet, and in slow, deep-toned words spoke:—

"Brethren, stern necessity has called another synomony. Before we proceed further advance the sign!" at the same time uplifting a dagger.

The prisoner saw only that one figure, but that was enough: its actions were faithfully duplicated by each one of the five members standing on the lower level.

For one instant that glittering dagger quivered on high, then the chief added:

"If one iota of unfaith or disobedience hath entered my heart, let this good blade find it!" and swift as thought the weapon descended, straight for the living heart itself. Fell, struck, only to shiver to glittering bits with a musical jingle!

"Tis well, my brethren! Once more we have withstood the supreme test imposed upon us, one and all! Once more I declare this synomony opened in due form, and ready for the transaction of such business as may properly come before it."

The prisoner felt a touch of mirth, just then, despite his perilous situation. This tame conclusion formed such a contrast to what had gone before: the blending of sublime and ridiculous!

There was a slight pause, broken by the one who presided.

"I behold a candidate before me: for what degree?"

"Of the grave!"

"Then he has sinned against the Secret Brotherhood?"

"He has sinned."

"To what degree?"

"Unto death—death—death!"

In stern chorus sounded those words, and despite his strong nerves, the man thus sentenced before trial, shivered.

Another pause, as though granting the prisoner time in which to fully realize the meaning of those sentences, then the presiding officer spoke again, in a measure dropping his artificial tones.

"The charge has been brought, but it must be proved. Who is the prosecutor?"

One of those masked shapes advanced, pausing at one end of the covered coffin, bowing lowly toward the presiding officer, then answering his question in hollow, sepulchral tones:

"That am I, Venerable Chief."

"Tis well. You remember the penalty to be paid for learning false witness, brother?"

"Death, first, to the lying tongue; next, to the false heart."

"And you are prepared to pay the full penalty in case you fail to fully justify the charges you are about to bring against this stranger arraigned before us?"

"Fully prepared, Venerable Chief."

The presiding officer lifted a gloved hand, and the prosecutor more directly faced the dais, sternly speaking:



"I charge the prisoner with plotting against the life and liberty of a member of this Secret League. If I fail to prove my charge, death be my reward!"

"You have heard the charge, prisoner; what answer have you to make? Speak freely, for in your case silence can mean only guilt, and guilt means death without mercy!"

"I deny the accusation, unless yonder coward lays his face bare to my eyes."

"What difference can that make?" demanded the chief.

"Because, only one man living besides myself can know the truth. If he is that man, then I will know better how to plead."

"There is but one truth: unless you are guilty as charged, why do you shrink from confessing it?"

"Why does my accuser shrink from revealing his face?"

The Venerable Chief lifted his right hand, and the prosecutor faced squarely toward the prisoner. He lifted his sable cowl with a swift movement, and there showed the grinning, fleshless skull of what had once been a human being!

Strong though his nerves assuredly were, the prisoner shrunk perceptibly from that wholly unexpected revelation, but as quickly he rallied again, saying:

"A double coward, then! So be it, if you prefer. I know that under all lies the face of Perry Clarkson, liar, thief, forger, assassin!"

"Why do you fix upon that name, prisoner?" demanded the presiding officer.

"Because no other living being can have foundation for making any such charge against me. Unless the face of Perry Clarkson lies back of that death-mask, I deny the charge, in toto."

"Why do you fix upon Perry Clarkson, I ask?"

There came no answer. The prisoner closed his jaws tightly, as though he had said all he wished.

"Why do you pick out Perry Clarkson from all others, I ask, prisoner?"

Still that dogged silence, and after waiting for a full minute, the Venerable Chief lifted his right hand, to add:

"Proceed, brother."

"On my tongue, head and heart fall the punishment written by our laws, if in what I am about to say there is aught of lie, malice or lust for revenge on my account," gravely declared he who had assumed the office of prosecutor.

"That is as it should be, brethren," commented the head of the Secret League. "We are banded together for the purpose of defending the right against the wrong. And our most deadly blows are, as they should be, held in reserve for any brother who so far forgets his sacred obligation, as to prostitute our just laws to serve his own evil ends."

There was a brief pause, and the prosecutor spoke again:

"I charge this man with being here in our midst, worse than a serpent of evil. I accuse him of treacherously plotting against the life and liberty of one whom he believed, and still believes, to be a member of our family."

"A crime equal to the worst: although turned toward the ruin of an outsider, he believed he was striking a blow at our brother," sternly commented the chief.

"The more surely to effect his evil ends, the prisoner came to Sahara in cunning disguise, but, what lies beneath that mask? One of Pinkerton's hired bloodhounds! One of their most trusted emissaries! A detective, who is named Elmore Blakewood. Let him deny this charge if he dares!"

"Do you accept the challenge, prisoner?" asked the chief.

Still that same dogged silence, and once more the prosecutor spoke:

"I charge the prisoner with coming to Sahara on a secret mission, entrusted to him by the head bloodhounds. That mission was to probe to the very bottom our secrets: to bring ruin upon our Secret League!"

## CHAPTER XXII.

### THE DEATH-DOOMED DETECTIVE.

ALL eyes were turned upon the accused, but he made no sign. The only change that could be noted was a slight curl of his bearded lips, as though in scorn at witnessing an empty farce.

Yet no one could better realize than he just how great was his peril. He knew this was but a form; that his doom had already been fixed upon, and would soon be pronounced by those masked lips.

"This, if brief, Venerable Chief, is my accusation. Shall I enter into details?"

"It might be as well. We wish to work no injustice, even to our most bitter enemies. Others may see an extenuation which your eyes, keen and trusty though we know them to be, possibly have overlooked."

"Your will is my law, Venerable Chief," bowed the prosecutor. "As I have charged, this bloodhound came to Sahara with the sole purpose of penetrating our secrets, and effecting our destruction as an Order."

"As the surest, safest method of working his way, he pitched upon one whom he thought belonged to our family. He made a mistake, but I claim that that fact is no palliation."

"He planned with exceeding cunning, and by lying to an enormous extent, he lured his chosen victim into what he fancied was to prove his fatal undoing; instead, he fell a victim to his own devilish schemes!"

A cry burst from the lips of the prisoner, and once more he exclaimed:

"Unless the face of Perry Clarkson lies back of that death-mask, I deny the charge in toto!"

"I deny that I am Perry Clarkson," answered the prosecutor.

"Prove it, then, by laying bare your face!"

"And in case I prove your wild guess false?"

"You can't do that, unless by further devilish trickery!"

"Still, if I should?"

There was a brief pause, broken by the more even words:

"Then I will pay the penalty of my own free will. I'll tell the whole truth, and abide by the consequence."

"Enough!" interposed the presiding officer.

"Brother, remove your official face, and let the unbeliever read how utterly he has been mistaken!"

Stepping nearer the captive, the prosecutor lifted his cunningly contrived mask, laying his natural face open to that burning gaze.

One fierce stare then the prisoner ejaculated in amazed tones:

"Not Clarkson, but—"

Swift as thought a hand was closed over his lips, and the point of a keen blade pricked his skin.

"Silence, fool! You realize your mistake, at last, and now—I demand the penalty he offered to pay, Venerable Chief!"

So saying, the prosecutor drew back, resuming his mask.

"Are you satisfied, prisoner?" sternly demanded the chief. "If so, begin your confession: as promised."

The detective rallied by a desperate effort of will, and knowing the truth would work him no worse harm, began speaking:

"Answer me one question, sir, and I'll make my pledge good."

"And that question is?"

"Whether or no Perry Clarkson is a member of your league?"

"He is not," declared the presiding officer.

"Then you can have no good cause of action against me, gentlemen," asserted the condemned. "That I am a detective, I freely admit. But that I came to Sahara with any thought of penetrating the secrets of your organization, I flatly deny."

"Still, you admit thinking Perry Clarkson was a member of our band?"

"Not until toward the last. Then I did fancy he might form one of those called in Sahara, the Secret Six. But I was trying to arrest him as a fugitive from an outraged law, not as your brother."

"In scheming against him, with the belief that he was a brother, you sinned just as deeply, though. If you have no better excuse to offer for yourself, prisoner, the brethren will proceed to their sworn duty."

"You have the power to murder me, of course, if you feel that way," retorted the accused, "but, wouldn't it be a bit wiser on your part to look at the other side of the shield?"

"Explain your meaning, if you have any."

"That is easily done, Venerable Chief," with an undisguised sneer accompanying that bombastic title. "Your assistant hangman, here, has shadowed it forth, when he declared I belonged to the Pinkerton Agency."

"A set of hireling cut-throats! In no other country save this land of boasted liberty, could such a devilish organization live for even a single day!"

"What a pity you haven't a bit of soap to chew on, a red flag for one hand, a gas-pipe bomb for the other, oh, most Venerable Chief!" mocked the reckless prisoner. "Then the picture would be complete, and just such another as we thrice-accursed Pinkertonians long since grew familiar with in our Windy City!"

A clear, mellow laugh broke forth, but was instantly smothered as the presiding officer flung up his right hand, commanding order.

"Ribaldry can do you no good, prisoner," he warned. "Unless you have something better to offer in your defense, our laws must take their course."

"As they will, no matter what I might say," boldly asserted the detective. "Still, as a matter of record, I ask a brief grace. Can I have it, Venerable Chief?"

"To be exercised after what fashion?"

"In making a plain statement of my case, of course."

"Confine yourself to that, and go on."

"Thanks, awfully! Well, I admit that I am a detective, and that I am in the employ of the Chicago Agency. They gave me a clew to follow up, and that brought me here to Sahara."

"I found my man in Perry Clarkson. He ran away, and lost his identity, out here in

the wilderness, but I know he is my man: a murderer!"

"I frankly admit that I picked up a few stray items which led me to believe him one of the gang known in these parts as the Secret Six of Sahara, but that cut no figure whatever in my game. I was after the man, not the family."

"Of course I did my level best to trap my game: that belongs to my profession. But I fully realized the danger I was inviting, and as only a natural precaution, I wrote a full account of what I had done and still meant to do, sending it under cover of a fictitious address, to my chief."

"If you know anything about the Pinkerton brothers, at all, you can give a pretty shrewd guess as to what will follow my unexplained disappearance."

There was a slight bustle back of the stake to which the detective was ironed, as though the masks were startled by those significant words; but silence was restored as the presiding officer once more uplifted a commanding hand.

"In still plainer words, prisoner, you informed your employers of your suspicions, as well as your facts?"

"Precisely that, your Honor," assented the detective. "I didn't know what might befall, and though I think I fear death as little as the next man, I'm just human enough to feel that I'd rest a bit easier in my grave if I could feel certain I'd be fully avenged on all who had aught to do with my taking-off."

"Have you anything further to offer, Detective Blakewood?"

"Nothing more, now I've given you honest warning of an after-clap," came the cool response.

There was silence for the space of a long minute, then the Venerable Chief arose, removing the sable hood which covered his head and neck, down to his shoulders.

This revealed a skull-mask, similar to that worn by the prosecutor. And as the five members performed the same action, revealing similar hideous visages, the prosecutor swept away that black pall, laying bare a coffin of rough, unplanned, unstained wood.

"Brethren, you have heard both sides, and the decision rests with you. What is your verdict: guilty, or not guilty?"

"Guilty!" came the unanimous response.

"And the penalty to be imposed?"

"Death!"

"It is well! You have decided in strict accordance with our laws, and your verdict stands approved. Now—to the coffin with him!"

Strong hands instantly fastened upon the prisoner, removing him from the stake and, despite his desperate struggles, placing him in the rude coffin, where iron bands were quickly shot into position, holding the death-doomed detective helpless at their awful mercy.

The chief advanced to the side of the coffin, coldly speaking:

"You have heard your doom, prisoner. All that remains is to execute the sentence. Have you any choice of deaths?"

"Old age!" defiantly panted the nearly exhausted Pinkerton representative, seemingly bent on proving himself game to the very last.

"You have been offered a choice, and you decline to avail yourself of our generosity," added the Venerable Chief. "Now—do your sworn duty, brothers!"

Two pair of gloved hands grasped the detective by the head, one holding his neck stiff, the other pressing a thumb steadily against the joints of the jaw. His efforts were resisted stubbornly, but there are limits to human endurance, and at length, with a choking groan, the detective's lips moved apart far enough for their purpose.

Standing in readiness was another member, holding a glass vial in his right hand, the contents of which he adroitly emptied into that open mouth, then instantly covering the lips, tightly compressing the detective's nostrils with his other hand.

Desperately the death-doomed strove to eject that fatal potion, but all in vain. Pitilessly those strong hands held him helpless, and as he was forced to breathe in order to escape dying of suffocation, the subtle drug slipped down his throat!

As soon as fully assured of this, he who administered the drug made a silent gesture which sent the others back, leaving the detective to his executioner alone.

"Poison, is it?" he gasped, huskily, and silently the executioner bowed his head. "Well, I'll fight against it, and you all, to the bitter end! I'll never—never aid ye, even by quiet!"

But his struggles were all in vain. Those iron bands held him helpless, almost motionless, and he vainly tried to vomit up the drug.

Little by little his struggles grew weaker, that skull-faced slayer watching him in pitiless silence, until—the end had surely come!

The executioner turned toward the dais, coldly saying:

"My task is complete, Venerable Chief. Elmore Blakewood is dead!"

## CHAPTER XXIII.

### OLD HALCYON ON DUTY.

AFTER parting with Mayfield, Old Halcyon hastened directly back to the Premier Hotel,



entering by the same door through which the two men had left the building, and running lightly up the narrow flight of stairs.

He had scarcely gained the landing above, when his keen ears caught ominous sounds coming from the chamber to which the wounded duelist had been taken, and fearing the worst, the mountain tramp hurried forward, opening the door, to find Keefe in a feverish state.

Alva Moody was doing his best to soothe the young man, but his very solicitude hindered, rather than aided him.

"Thank the Lord!" he ejaculated, as he looked around to recognize Old Halcyon at the opening of the door. "The boy's took bad, and if you'll only stay with him, I'll run for Doc!"

"Wait a bit, first. Mebbe—it's good fri'nds that's 'tendin' of ye, neighbor. Don't ye know—"

"You, yes, not him!" said Keefe, after a brief stare at the stranger. "Kick him out! I want—did I dream—about her?"

Despite his wounds, Randall Keefe lifted an arm to close over that hairy neck, and when the final words came, his lips were close to the wanderer's ear.

"Not ef 'twas ary thing good, it wasn't no dream, honey," instantly affirmed the old fellow, with a strong sense of relief.

Although Keefe might be feverish, he was still sane. What he needed more than anything else, just then, was judicious humoring, even if that should call for a little stretching of the truth.

"Sha'n't I go hunt up Doc, pardner?" asked the landlord, breathing rapidly, and wiping his heated face as though he had been terribly hard at work for hours. "He's crazier than a bed-bug!"

"Lie—kick him out!"

Old Halcyon turned his head, giving an apologetic wink as he said:

"Rack out o' this, critter, an' so save yer corporosity! Ef I want ye fer ary thing, I'll blow my bazoo, so don't go too mighty fur off!"

Another wink rendered his meaning perfectly clear, and Moody left the chamber, to linger in the corridor for further instructions.

As Halcyon had declared to Derrick Mayfield, he felt that his first duty was owing to the man whom he had seconded in that luckless encounter, and he loyally banished all conflicting notions, falling to work with an earnestness which was not long in producing the desired effect.

He quickly learned, what he had immediately suspected, that honest Moody, having made up his mind that poor Keefe was fated to die, had treated him as raving, from the moment of his rousing from that quiet sleep in which the wanderer had left him.

"Choked me off! Made out I was crazy! Good heart, but fool' head!" disgustedly declared the young man.

Unless outward seeming was deceptive, he was rallying far more rapidly and completely than Halcyon had expected, or could yet think possible. Still, now that the first irritating cause was removed, Keefe certainly was cooling down, yet without any perceptible loss of strength.

Warily watching his patient, yet humoring him as much as practicable the while, it did not take Old Halcyon very long to get at the prime trouble: a woman, as proverbial!

In his desire to soothe the injured man as much as possible, Old Halcyon went a bit too far with his statements, and Keefe flatly charged him with deception.

"You're only a little less provoking than Moody, pardner," Randall said, with forced composure. "Can't I trust any man? Must I get up on my feet to serve myself?"

"You couldn't, even ef I was wicked 'nough to let ye try," gravely declared the veteran, a gentle hand hovering over that broad bosom. "Ef I've said mebbe a weeny bit more'n I ought, lad, 'twas beca' I knowed you needed quiet more'n anythin' else."

"I'll never know rest until—tell me all, man!"

And Halcyon o'eye', feeling that suspense would surely work greater harm than the truth, let that be bad as it might.

In silence Keefe listened, only an occasional frown or a twitching muscle betraying his secret feelings.

After Halcyon ceased speaking, the wounded sport lay with lids closed, so quiet that the watcher began to hope sleep was again coming to lend that too busy brain much needed rest; but then, opening his eyes and gazing steadily into that homely face, Keefe spoke:

"Thanks, pardner, for so much. I couldn't be sure, and Moody wouldn't even begin to talk sense when I—"

"He knowed ye wasn't strong 'nough to stand it, lad. Now, ef you could jest shet them winkers, an' sort o' ketch a nap, like, why—"

"Stop, you!" with an impatient gesture and sudden frown. "More—about her—you know."

Very patiently Old Halcyon repeated all he had said concerning the unexpected appearance of Caroline Alvord, yet watching closely the effect of his words, ready to break off if Keefe should betray growing excitement.

Instead, a faint smile came into his haggard

face: already so vastly altered for the worse by his loss of blood and the shock of those wounds.

Far from working him harm, the knowledge that Caroline had so openly testified to the intensity of her love, was doing him good!

"Go on," as Old Halcyon reached the end of his budget. "More. Tell me what followed. She is not— God!" with a sudden start and wild look coming into his eyes at the bare thought. "She isn't—not dead?"

"Ef you wa'n't wuss off, I'd be turrible tickled, lad," hastily spluttered Old Halcyon, startled in spite of his strong nerves. "Dead? The idee! An' me gittin' ready to order my fine boots fer to dance at the weddin' of ye!"

But those startled eyes were watching him with painful intensity, and young Keefe would no longer accept empty words on trust.

"You're hiding something! She's not—have you seen her, since?"

"No, fer how could I?" desperately admitted Old Halcyon. "When thar wasn't no way fer me to—"

The sound of quick footfalls on the stairs gave him an excuse for breaking off, and as the sounds struck the corridor, heading their way, a fresh hope caused him to ejaculate:

"Lawseel! Ef that's the doctor, I'll feel more like huggin' him than ever I did ary old maid which— Powerful glad to see ye, doctor!" as he sprung to open the door, revealing the more than welcome figure of Samuel Blakelock.

"You've been dosing him with irritants, sir!" harshly declared the physician, after one swift glance into that face, the sunken cheeks of which now bore twin spots of hectic color. "Confound such a world, anyway! If I had the making of it, I'd— Well, sir, how goes it, now?"

It was an almost farcical change, as Blakelock turned from nurse to patient, but there was something little short of magical in that firm, self-reliant, yet gentle touch.

Keefe yielded to its beneficial influence, and drawing back as far as possible out of the way in those contracted quarters, Halcyon watched in silence: and as he watched, he came to realize something of the rich human kernel underlying that prickly husk.

Randall Keefe meekly submitted to the examination which Blakelock made, but then he spoke up, with far more strength than the doctor had hoped to find in one so seriously wounded.

"Doctor, are you really anxious to cure me of this business?"

"Am I?" ejaculated Blakelock, startled by the oddness of his query. "Of course I am, man, dear! It'd be equal to a year's free advertising, don't you see?"

Keefe smiled faintly at this assumed cynicism, but was not to be driven from his main point so easily.

"Then, give me my own way for a little. It'll do what all your drugs without cannot. While my brain is sick, how can the rest of me get well?"

"It's all 'long of the young lady, doctor," ventured Halcyon, but shrinking back as Blakelock turned that way with a dark scowl.

"Teach your grandmother how to empty hen's fruit, will you, sir?"

"Still, doctor, he's right: I must know what—"

"If I tell you all you wish to know, will you promise me to behave yourself for the rest of the night?"

"If you only—can you, though?"

"Of course I can!" with his false severity vanishing, as he gently took that nervously moving hand between his broad, warm palms. "What's the use in pretending to be a doctor, if you don't carry a stock of knowledge, as well as drugs? And as for Miss— I say, stranger!"

"Lawsee—yes, sir!" spluttered Halcyon, giving a startled jump in his corner.

"Will you oblige me by just going down-stairs and looking for the new moon? Don't be in any particular hurry about coming back: we can worry along for a few minutes without your presence."

"Don't stay long, pardner," amended Keefe, with a touch of friendly anxiety in both face and voice. "You'll watch with me, won't you?"

"That's a different thing," quickly spoke up Blakelock. "If you are willing to have him as an auditor, I have no objections."

"He's my friend, and has proved it. Please stay, pardner!"

"I'll come back in a minute or so, then," answered the veteran, mindful of the pledge he had given Derrick Mayfield.

He left the chamber, hurrying down to the office, where he found Alva Moody at the desk.

A seemingly careless question assured him that no person had asked for either himself or the note he agreed to leave, and in hopes of seeing something of the man in person, Halcyon stepped outside.

This hope was frustrated, however, and after debating the question for a few minutes, the wanderer decided to prove true to his trust, even should that call for a postponement of the Clarkson affair.

Returning to the hotel, he wrote on a sheet of paper the words "I can't come. Postpone, if you must have my help." This he placed in an envelope, sealed it, wrote a name upon the back:

"Philo Dobbs," then intrusted it to the landlord's care, explaining:

"Ef a gentleman what favors me a good bit 'bout the figgerhead, should happen to call an' ax fer me, jest hand him that, neighbor. Ye won't fergit, now?"

"Certainly not. You are going back to poor Keefe, then?"

"He axed me to, yes. Reckon I'll git 'long with him better'n a smarter critter," with a grave smile. "Two crazy heads, ye know!"

Without waiting for reply or comment, Halcyon left the office, mounting the stairs, then tiptoeing along the corridor until near the chamber door beyond which was Randall Keefe and the doctor.

#### CHAPTER XXIV.

##### TRUTH, OR VAIN RAVINGS?

THANKS to all that had transpired of late days, even apart from the scene on the dueling ground that day, Dr. Blakelock felt no need of questioning his patient as to his wishes, and at once began to administer the remedy craved.

He told how Caroline Alvord had been removed from the scene, and shrewdly concealing the place to which she had been taken, told how, after attending to the wounded man, he had dropped around that way.

He frankly admitted that the young lady had received a severe shock, the effects of which she would be likely to feel for some little time, but counteracted this by quickly adding:

"That don't mean she is in any danger, young fellow, so you needn't jump clean out of your skin at the bare telling. She will be ready to do her share of nursing you back to life and strength, long before I'm ready to resign my patient to even her tender bands."

"Her father—hates me!" groaned Keefe, dejectedly.

"What matter, so long as that hatred isn't hereditary? Shame, my little boy! If I couldn't do better than that, I'd freely own myself wholly unfit for loving a true-hearted girl, much less making her my wife!"

Keefe smiled faintly, and there was a grateful light in his eyes as they rested upon that bluff, honest face. For the first time since their acquaintance began, he was beginning to understand this odd package of whimsicalities.

And then, having fully assured his patient that Caroline Alvord was in no danger from the terrible shock she had received, either physically or mentally, Dr. Blakelock gradually led up to the rest; stating how she had been taken to the Illingsworth residence, as being so much nearer to hand than her own home.

It gave Keefe quite a shock, and threatened to set his blood to flowing feverishly again, but the physician had his remedy ready.

He told how he had found Carry, protesting against remaining under that roof, indignantly resisting the coaxing and pleading which Grace first, and Hobart Illingsworth later, brought to bear upon the girl.

"She wouldn't hear to it for an instant, sir!" declared Blakelock, speaking as though he both understood and sympathized with the young lady in her repugnance. "If ever those people heard naked truth, they got it right then and there! Got it in great chunks, too, mind you!"

"My noble girl!" murmured Keefe, with a long sigh of relief.

"And so, as physician in charge, I ordered her instant removal to her home," declared Blakelock, with a low chuckle. "And I saw that my prescription was faithfully taken, too, be sure!"

He went on to detail just how this was done, and ended by saying that, so far from any ill effects resulting from the removal, Caroline appeared intensely relieved, and that he had left her only a few minutes before coming to the hotel.

"She'll be on her own feet to-morrow, or I know nothing of woman-nature. She'll be calling here to ask after your health, and if you're anything like the man I take you to be, sir, you'll do your level best to assist me in curing you, so that happy meeting may come off just as soon as possible!"

Without waiting for remark or answer, Dr. Blakelock rose from his chair, passing over to the door, opening it, to ejaculate:

"Hello! eavesdropping, are you?"

"No, sir, but I was just—"

"Never mind explaining: we were not conspiring against the public safety, and your being here saves my straining my voice. One word with you, sir. Back in a moment, Keefe!"

Closing the door behind him, Dr. Blakelock drew Old Halcyon far enough up the corridor to prevent his words being caught by the ears of the wounded man, then quickly saying:

"I've given him the medicine he needed most, just now. The former directions stand, and you—of course you intend watching by him?"

"Ef he'd ruther hev me then a better nuss, yes, sir."

"Follow orders, and I reckon you'll answer. He's taken a fancy to you, it seems, though I can't see just why," with blunt directness.

"Nur me, sir," meekly admitted Halcyon.

"Never mind apologizing. He's little better than a lunatic, just now, and not accountable for his crazy fancies."



Blakelock gave a few terse directions relating to the medicine left, then added:

"Keep him as quiet as you can, but don't make matters worse by openly crossing the poor fellow. If he insists on talking, humor him in every way, but don't stick at a few lies, if you see they will help calm him down to the sleeping point."

"If he should be tuck worse in the night?"

"Ask Moody to call me: he'll understand. But he'll not get worse, if you play your part properly. If you don't—well, I'll prescribe for you in the morning!"

Snarling ferociously, the physician turned back to the chamber, saying a few words in parting to his patient, then turning him over to the care of Old Halcyon.

Shortly after the doctor left, Moody came tiptoeing up-stairs, and meeting him at the door, Halcyon reported progress favorable. And, in return, the landlord stated that the fellow who had acted as second to Perry Clarkson, had called for the note, after receiving which he had immediately hurried away, without word or explanation, or leaving a word in the shape of an answer.

"That's all right, neighbor," quietly assured the wanderer. "You kin run up every hour or so, to see ef ary thing is wanted, though I'm bop-in' he'll sleep pritty much through the night, now."

Instructing Halcyon how to call help most easily, in case of a sudden emergency, the landlord retraced his steps, leaving the watcher to enter the chamber, there to resume his post of duty.

Keefe was lying motionless, but it seemed the quietude of health-giving slumber, rather than the dubious stupor which so frequently accompanies serious gunshot wounds.

His troubled brain had been greatly relieved by the tidings given him by Dr. Blakelock concerning the woman of his ardent passion. Then, too, the excitement which naturally followed his hearing whither Caroline had been taken while in her deathlike swoon, had seriously depleted his scanty stock of strength.

This fact was written upon his ghastly pale face, and Old Halcyon frowned gloomily as he noted the sad change wrought by those few hours.

Only for his perfect health and magnificent constitution, Randall Keefe would scarcely have a chance left him; as it was, the fight for life would be long and doubtful, at the best.

Until past the turn of night, that sleep lasted; then the wounded man began to moan and stir restlessly. A hectic flush began to mark his sunken cheeks, and as Halcyon gently touched his brow with a hand, he could feel the heat of fever increasing.

Then those blanched lips parted, to emit words which caused the watcher to lean closer, fairly holding his own breath as he drank them in: words which related to the evil gang locally known as the Six Sinners of Sabara, or the Secret Six.

A chilling fear crept over the listener during those first few minutes, for those disconnected words, those incomplete sentences, seemed to implicate the one whose lips gave them utterance!

It was during this spell of delirium that Alva Moody came up for the last time before retiring, to ask if he should not relieve the watcher, saying that either himself or his good wife, Nancy, would gladly serve as nurse, if wished.

But Halcyon, mindful of those dangerous ravings, closed the door behind himself, while answering the landlord.

"I reckon it'd best stay jest so, sence he 'pears to hev tuck sech a fancy fer me to stay by him, neighbor. Thank'e, all the same, though."

"Well, if you need help, don't hesitate to call on us. You know how to find us, I reckon," said Moody, manfully trying to stifle a sleepy yawn, but making very poor success at it.

"Ef he keeps quieted down, mebbe I'll rout ye out pritty tofable airy in the mornin', but fer now—go hunt yer piller, neighbor!"

Old Halcyon was more than glad to get rid of this friendly caller, for Keefe was once more talking aloud, and there was no telling what dangerous revelations he might make. Of course Alva Moody was an honest, well-meaning man, but hardly one the veteran would choose to share such a secret with him.

It was a trying ordeal, those next two hours, but Halcyon made the best of it, feeling partially repaid by the knowledge, gradually won by piecing bits of ravings together, that his fears had wronged the wounded duelist.

Randall Keefe was not one of the Six Sinners, but he said enough to insure Halcyon that he more than suspected who at least several of these guilty beings were.

Was this truth, or merely empty ravings, based on his recent collision with Perry Clarkson? For that gambler was one of those denounced, and associated with him were Gilmore, Trefoil, the mayor, and—Grace Illingsworth!

Seeing how terribly the feverish ravings were weakening his charge, Halcyon bethought himself of the woman so passionately loved, and by dint of repeating that name, close to those ears, he at length restored Keefe to consciousness.

Then he gently forced him to swallow the sedative draught left by the doctor, and finally had the satisfaction of seeing Randolph drop off into a quiet sleep once more.

After that, the night was uneventful, so far as the watcher was concerned, and as Keefe showed no signs of rousing up again, as the dawn began to lighten the far-away east, Old Halcyon concluded to call the landlord, as a relief.

He felt greatly worn by the severe strain to which he had been subjected, and knew that he really needed a breath of fresh air.

Following the instructions given him by Moody, Halcyon found no difficulty in rousing that worthy couple, and in a very brief space of time, the landlord came to relieve the watcher.

"You'll find a cup o' coffee heating for you, Nancy says," he reported, after receiving instructions as to what must be done in case the patient roused up before Old Halcyon came back.

The veteran stopped to take the coffee, which seemed exactly what he needed most, just then, as a "bracer," then passed on out of the building, promising to be back by or before the time Mrs. Moody could get him a hot meal of victuals.

All was quiet in town when Halcyon gained the street, and the cool, fresh air, coming down out of the mountains, felt gloriously grateful to his rather feverish face as he bared his head before it, walking aimlessly toward the public square in the center of the town.

Suddenly he stopped short, staring horrified at a growsome spectacle.

## CHAPTER XXV.

### A GROWSOME SPECTACLE.

ALMOST exactly in the center of the public square grew a single tree, of goodly dimensions, although no particular beauty of shape.

Leaning against the trunk of this tree, as nearly upright as was safe to leave it without other support, stood a rude structure of wood, the rough, unpainted boards joined together after the model which appears so nearly universal.

Faint though the morning light was as yet, Halcyon could not mistake that shape for aught other than it surely was: a coffin!

And, even from where he stood, stopped short by that uncanny sight, he could see that the coffin held an occupant!

Like a revelation there came to his startled brain some of the heart-chilling tales told concerning the deeds of the Secret Six of Sabara, and then an inkling of the awful truth sent his blood to leaping hotly through his veins, blurring his eyes with a sparkling mist, causing him to catch at his throat with one hand, as though on the point of suffocation.

A hoarse cry rose to his lips, and fighting back that singular dizziness, the Stranger within the Gates moved forward, finding himself only a few yards distant from that terrifying object, when his vision cleared sufficiently for him to make out more than the general detail.

"Holy heaven!" Old Halcyon gasped, as he recognized that face, now so deathlike and ghastly. "The Detroit Detective! Done for by those pitiless devils, the Secret Six!"

If Halcyon could have seen his own face just then, he might well have marveled at the strong likeness which existed between it and that of the confined detective.

One was blanched by the finger of death, the other by horror and a growing thirst for vengeance.

On the breast of the dead man was a black cloth on which was printed in white the grim emblems of the Secret Six—skull and crossbones; while across the white forehead was stamped the mystic symbols: "S. G. S." Even by that uncertain light they seemed to show blood red, as though only recently placed there.

Once more the sign of the Secret Six was repeated, on a broad placard nailed to the tree-trunk above the upper end of the leaning coffin, but Halcyon hardly gave that a passing glance: he seemed held like one fascinated by that growsome spectacle of the confined detective whom, only a few short hours before, he had parted from in the height of his health, strength and activity!

Before the stranger could fairly realize what this all meant, much less decide upon his wisest course to pursue, another person made the same startling discovery, and, pausing only long enough to be sure it was not a phantom born of over-drinking, this new-comer jerked forth the revolvers from his belt, and turning their muzzles upward, fired shot after shot in swift succession, at the same time yelling at the top of his voice.

Halcyon gave a great start at the first shot, his right hand instinctively dropping to his own weapons: but then that weird spell was renewed, and he stood staring at the confined detective.

It took only a few seconds for the early bird to empty his guns, and as he ejected the empty shells and replaced them with fresh cartridges, he drew nearer to Old Halcyon, huskily saying:

"Turrible, hain't it, jest! Nother dose—to Hades with 'em!"

"Who could—who did it?"

"Don't them thar tell?" first pointing, then shaking a fist at the symbols. "Six Sinners, it says, an' though this is the third like o' it this town hes had sence I fu'st struck here, them devils is still Six, an' Satan's own they be!"

Even this soon the alarm had been taken, and half-dressed citizens were rushing toward the Plaza, those who had less accurately located the shots, being guided afresh by the loud yell now given by the man who had joined Halcyon in that terrible discovery.

"Roll up, hyar! More dirty work done by the Secret Six, an' it's plenty time we was doin' somethin' on our side, I'm howlin' out loud!"

The crowd rapidly increased in size, and for a goodly number of minutes, little could be said or done, save utter random ejaculations, ask useless questions which no one attempted to answer, make fruitless suggestions which passed unheeded, and, above all, stare at that weird, uncanny spectacle.

Halcyon had long since recognized the man who had called himself Derrick Mayfield since arriving at Sabara, but whom he well knew to be Elmore Blakewood, one of Pinkertons' detectives.

Owing to the manner in which they had been thrown together of late, the wanderer naturally was seriously shocked by this tragedy, but he quickly rallied his nerve, and in hopes of catching some clew which might aid him in avenging the unfortunate detective, he moved closer, to decipher the writing on that placard fastened over the head of the coffin.

First came the mystic symbols appropriated by the Six Sinners of Sabara: the ruddy letters, S. G. S.

Underneath was this message:—

### "TAKE WARNING!"

"The coffin for the spy! The grave for all who attempt to penetrate the mysteries of the Secret Synonymy of Sabara! The knife for him who dares remove this object lesson, or touch it, before the day is done."

"This fool set a trap to catch others, but fell into it himself! Take warning, all similar fools!"

"S. G. S."

Almost unconsciously, Halcyon lifted a hand to brush away a fly which just then settled upon that ghastly face, but a startled cry from more than one pair of lips checked his motion, and as he turned partly around, his own face hardly less pale than that of the confined detective, the man who had given the fusillade alarm, excitedly cried out:

"Don't ye, pard! Don't ye dast to tetch!"

"It's sure death, to even touch!" howled another.

"Look at the warning, above!" from still another.

From face to face Halcyon glanced, a flush creeping back to his face, and his eyes beginning to glow dangerously.

"Death to tetch, is it?" he asked, almost savagely, then turning to scare away the buzzing insects. "It'll be death to the dirty devils as done the deed, then!" and as though to emphasize his vow, he deliberately placed his right hand upon that white forehead, turning a defiant glance upon the excited spectators as he performed the action.

"Why should I skeer to tetch him, gentlemen?" he asked, gravely. "I wasn't skeered o' him livin', why should I be afraid of him dead?"

"Tain't him, but 'others, the Secret Six. Beware ov them! Don't they tell ye all hands off? An' when they give warnin', you want to stand from under, stranger!"

"Bah! ye talk like fools!" retorted Halcyon, with a sudden burst of indignation. "This is the work o' devils, but none so mighty that they can't be brung to light an' punished as thar foul doin's deservet! An' ef thar's jest two men as is men 'mongst ye all, I'll agree to run the Secret Six down to death!"

"Look out!" cried a harsh, excited voice from beyond the crowd. "Don't ye tetch that thing, ye cussed fool!"

The voice was that of Jacob Gilmore, Marshal of Sabara, and he came striding forward, his height enabling him to look over the heads of the crowd and gain a glimpse of that grim warning.

Old Halcyon turned at that insolent summons, his face hotly flushing once more, either at the tone, words or author.

"Don't ye tetch, I say!" added Gilmore, shouldering a passage through the crowd, now comprising nearly a third of Sabara's population. "It's death! Surer death than the p'izenest o' all p'izen!"

Then the Stranger within the Gates now lost his forced composure, and stepping close to the tree, tore down the warning, and holding it aloft, facing the city marshal with glowing eyes and stern-set face, cried: "Thar! I dare the Secret Six to do thar double-wust! I spit on thar warnin'!"

Even Jacob Gilmore seemed stupefied by this fierce outburst, for he recoiled, one hand dropping to a pistol-butt, his face turning as pale as the thick coating of tan would permit.

"Ef ye ax why, this is a part of it," added Old Halcyon, his voice lowering, yet full of a



stern sadness, one hand reaching out to rest lightly upon that cold forehead. "Mebbe this pore soul hed the same mother who bore me! Mebbe he's my twin-brother!"

## CHAPTER XXVI.

## A DANGEROUS ACCUSATION.

OLD HALCYON glanced over that dense mass of faces, then swallowed the lump which appeared to rise in his throat.

"He denied bein' sech, I know, gentlemen, but thar mought 'a' bin reasons fer doin' it, which he reckoned was enough to justify a not-so. An' then, too, when I see him last—afore *this* come to pass—peared like he was beginnin' to soften, an' when I got up an' out, this mornin', I was jest a-thinkin' how happy 'twould make the poor old mother, 'way back home in Maine, ef I could fetch her wanderin' boy back to her bedside, in time to ketch her last prayer o' thanksgivin'! An' now—this is the end of it all!"

Another brief pause, during which Old Halcyon appeared fighting down his strong emotions, then he uplifted a tightly clinched hand, its mate still resting upon that death-blanching brow, and sternly cried:

"I couldn't *save*, seems like, but I kin *avenge*! An' right hyar, afore the eyes an' ears o' ye all, men o' Sahara, I take my oath to play even with the dirty devils who done him to his death!"

Scarcely had this fierce oath crossed his lips, than a sharp cry rung forth from beyond the crowd, and as Old Halcyon looked in that direction, he recognized a tall, half-dressed figure, with bandaged head, running toward the spot.

It was the figure of Perry Clarkson, and he instantly followed that cry with the startling words:

"If murder has been done, men, yonder stands the foul assassin!"

The crowd parted like a living wave, and at the other end of that closely packed avenue, the gambler came to a stand, his white hand pointing directly at the Stranger Within the Gates!

A breathless pause, then an inarticulate roar of human voices. Not a word was to be distinguished, yet it was almost surely a death-cry!

"I say it again!" cried Clarkson, stepping nearer, his bandaged right hand still covering that erect figure. "If this is murder, the crime lies at yonder impostor's door!"

"Steady, the bull o' ye!" sternly cried Old Halcyon, facing this totally unexpected peril with rare nerve, although no man living could more fully realize just how dangerous this accusation might prove in the end. "That man lies, ef he says I hed ary thing to do with killin' this pore critter."

"I can prove my words, if—"

"Do it, then, neighbor," interrupted Old Halcyon. "Prove it, an' I'll submit to pay the full penalty, without hit or kick! But, until you do prove your words, the rest o' ye want to keep all hands off."

"That's nothing more than fair play," said Harry Trefoil, in the measured voice which hardly ever failed to carry conviction with it, no matter on which side it might be lifted.

"Wait, Gilmore," as the city marshal took a step forward, as though bent on arresting the accused stranger.

"Thar's one white man in town, anyway," remarked the wanderer, betraying no outward signs of excitement or personal fear. "It's all I'm axin' of ye, neighbor: jest a fair show fer my good money!"

"Stand back, please, friends," added Trefoil, taking it upon himself to act as master of ceremonies for the moment. "Make a little more room in the center, so—come forward, Clarkson, will you?"

The gambler stepped forward promptly enough, though he bore little resemblance to the dandified sport Sahara knew so well.

He was only partly dressed, as already mentioned, evidently having hastened out at the alarm without thinking of coat, vest or collar.

His face was very pale, and about his head—otherwise bare—was a blood-stained bandage, as though he had been recently wounded.

Halcyon glanced swiftly over his accuser as Clarkson came forward, then quietly replaced the hand which had dropped from the cold brows of Derrick Mayfield, saying in grave, measured tones:

"Before God an' man, neighbors, I take my solemn oath that I never laid heavier hand onto this pore critter, than you see me right now!"

Pausing a moment, that all might see and comprehend, Old Halcyon swiftly lifted his other hand, pointing an accusing finger at the gambler, sternly crying:

"That is my oath, all! Kin you say as much, Perry Clarkson?"

"I'll do even more than that," retorted the gambler, quickly. "I'll prove my words, while yours are but empty wind. A devil who could turn such a foul trick as this, surely would not hesitate about clinching it all with a lying oath! Now—arrest him, Gilmore!"

"Not so fast, neighbors!" and Halcyon, with marvelous quickness, drew a brace of revolvers, the hammers rising as the guns came to a warning level. "Show fair cause, an' I'll yield like a

lamb; but ef not, you may take the shell, but never the man!"

Despite his admitted nerve, Clarkson shrunk visibly, and even the city marshal hesitated before rushing upon what would almost certainly prove his death.

No one who saw Halcyon in those seconds, could for even a breath doubt his resolve: he might be slain, but he would yield only to death, unless he could win the chance he demanded.

Only Harry Trefoil seemed unmoved, for he alone spoke up, quietly moving forward a pace as he said:

"Put up your guns, stranger. You shall have your show, first, and no man shall touch you until you are proven guilty. Try fight, and I'll have to call you down, myself."

"That's on the level, neighbor?"

"On the dead level, pardner."

"Then I'd be a bog ef I axed more," frankly admitted Halcyon, lowering and replacing his pistols in their scabbards. "All I want is a fair show, an' your word is bail fer that."

"You have my word, sir," with a bow; then, turning toward Perry Clarkson, he made a silent gesture which spoke for itself.

"All I wanted was to guard against his breaking away, or being rescued by the Six," more calmly explained the gambler. "Since you go his bail, I'm willing to let it stand, just so."

"All right. You said you could prove him the guilty man: do it."

Just then Mayor Illingsworth came hurrying to the spot, and his arrival caused another brief delay. He showed how seriously he was shocked by that truly gruesome spectacle, but after a few words of hurried explanation, he spoke up, like one who feels legalized to take charge of the investigation:

"Who can give any explanation of this ugly affair? It's got to be probed to the very bottom, and if the guilty one can be found—"

"He is already found, sir," interposed Clarkson, pointing at old Halcyon, who stood quietly awaiting events. "Yonder he stands, and I can prove that he killed this poor fellow!"

"You've said that times a-plenty, Mr. Clarkson," gravely retorted the Stranger Within the Gates. "Now git down to level business, 'cordin' to rule. I'm got other business waitin', but I'll stay long 'nough to make you out as big a liar as you've bin proved a card-thief."

Mayor Illingsworth commanded order all around, then bade Clarkson prove his words, if that lay in his power.

Readily enough the gambler began his story, artfully blending lies with truth, yet sticking pretty plainly to the facts which led up to the death-trap, the night before.

"You all know what good cause I had to feel grateful to Derrick Mayfield," formed a part of his plausible story. "He stood by me when I needed a disinterested friend, and so, when he came to me for backing in his turn, of course I was willing to do what lay in my power. I'd have been worse than a dog, not to have done so!"

"Mayfield told me he was a detective, here in pursuit of a murderer, whom he had surely found in *this fellow*: Old Halcyon, as he calls himself! And he asked me to help trap the fellow."

"Why didn't he apply to the legal authorities?" asked the mayor.

"Precisely what I suggested, at once, but he gave me his reasons, and I admitted they were good ones. He said he believed this fugitive from justice was in reality one of the lawless gang we know best as the Secret Six of Sahara."

There came an ominous muttering from the crowd at this, but the warning hand of Mayor Illingsworth quickly quelled the disturbance.

"Go on, sir. What else happened?"

"I agreed to help Mayfield, and let him do all the planning. He said he felt sure he could lure his man outside of town, where he could effect his capture without too great risk of losing life on either side, and then move him across the range under cover of night, before his allies could suspect enough to rally for a rescue."

"Although I had no good cause for doubting the word of the man who had stood at my back when his help was really needed, sir, I wouldn't go into the job with my eyes in blindness. I asked many questions, and Mayfield told me pretty much everything."

"He said his real name was Elmore Blake-wood, and that he was a detective from Chicago, acting under instructions from the Pinkerton Brothers."

"He declared that this fellow—Dobbs, or Old Halcyon, was a daring criminal, wanted for a brutal murder committed in or near Detroit, Michigan. That he had trailed him down, too surely for any mistake to exist."

"Did he tell you what my real name was, neighbor?" coolly asked the stranger.

"No, nor did I ask him: why should I?"

"Waal, mebbe I wanted to know jest *who* I was, that's all."

"I know *what* you are, and so does the soul of yonder poor devil!" sternly retorted the gambler, pointing his bandaged hand at the confined detective.

Again that ominous muttering arose, and once more Mayor Illingsworth commanded silence, sternly adding:

"Time enough to condemn when guilt is fully fixed upon the right pair of shoulders, gentlemen! I promise you that I'll press this matter until we've found the bottom facts, then—"

"Then the rope!" sternly cried one of the citizens. "A long rope, and a mighty short shrift, say I!"

That this was the popular feeling, was plainly proven by the chorus of shouts, fierce and deadly, yet subdued in part.

Old Halcyon smiled gravely as he glanced around that assembly, but he never flinched, even when the worst seemed about to happen.

Whatever his failings might be, a lack of nerve could hardly be numbered among them.

Having produced silence once more, the mayor asked Clarkson:

"You said you agreed to help trap the game: did you do it?"

"I tried it on," with a forced laugh as he gently tapped his bandaged head, then added. "This is what I got, and *that* will show ju' how far poor Blakewood succeeded!" nodding toward the coffin.

Once more that bloodthirsty growl broke forth, aimed at Old Halcyon.

## CHAPTER XXVII.

## OLD HALCYON'S DEFENSE.

Few men living could better gauge a mob than the dandy gambler, and now that he had come face to face with this stranger, feeling that one or the other of them must surely go down once for all, he played his cards the best he knew how.

All that was needed was for the rush to begin: after the first step, there could be but one ending.

Old Halcyon would resist, sure as fate, and just so surely, his first shot or initial blow would prove his death-doom, even more certainly than it could that of the man against whom he might level it.

But the dandy gambler for once had met a foeman fully worthy his steel, and Old Halcyon never gave the slight provocation which was lacking before that growling crowd could change into the ravening beast whose thirst could be appeased only by fresh blood.

He stood lightly erect, his face grave and calm, one hand lightly resting upon the edge of the coffin beside which he was standing, the other at his middle, one thumb tucked under his belt, hand and arm resting at ease.

It was a seemingly careless attitude, yet those who watched it all knew how easy it would be for the stranger to drop hand to pistol, and more than suspected there was a purpose in that choice.

That ominous sound was growing louder, and man's most dangerous passions were gaining the ascendancy, yet Old Halcyon betrayed no sign of fear or uneasiness.

A pledge had been given him, and he was depending upon the owner of the Good Times to keep his part of the agreement.

Possibly Harry Trefoil understood as much, for he stepped forward and faced the growling crowd, pistols in hand, and what those who knew him best called his "graveyard look" upon his face.

"Simmer down, gentlemen!" he commanded, glancing over that array of excited faces. "You heard my pledge. I'm bail for this man until he is fairly proven guilty. Of course I'd hate to hurt any person, but my word is about the most valuable part of my possessions, and when *that* is jumped upon—good by!"

Halcyon smiled gravely at this, but his easy attitude did not alter in the slightest degree, and his voice was calm and placid as ever when he spoke up:

"I reckon you're meanin' well, neighbor, an' fer that I'm owin' you thanks, but ef it's all the same to you, sir, I'd rather they wasn't no guns pulled until the time's full-ripe fer usin' of 'em."

"Do you wish me to stand idly by while the crowd smothers you?" demanded Trefoil, his weapons lowering.

"Not ef it should come to that, neighbor, fer I'm jest a common man, an' lynchin' 'd hurt me pritty nigh as smart as ary other critter, I do reckon," answered the stranger, with all gravity.

"Looks like 'twas getting 'round to that point in a hurry, or I'd never have pushed to the front," retorted his backer. "Still, if you have no further use for me, I can easily withdraw."

"Tain't that, neighbor," earnestly assured Old Halcyon. "I'm feelin' fuller'n a tick with gratitude, but—*this* is my meanin', sir, an' the rest o' you gentlemen:

"I'm only askin' a fair shake, an' I reckon I'm sure o' gittin' *that*, whar the biggest part o' the crowd is clean white. Ef I'm proved guilty, my life hain't wu'th fightin' fer by my own self, let 'lone ary outsider. See?"

"Do you deny your guilt, sir?" sternly asked Mayor Illingsworth.

"Wait, an' see ef ary denial is needed," coolly replied Halcyon, at the same time shifting his position to the other side of the coffin, thus



bringing that barrier between himself and the Good Times' sport.

It was a rather odd movement to make, under the circumstances, and a barely perceptible flush came into the cadaverous-looking face of Trefoil. It seemed to belie the truth expressed in words by the man whom he was offering to defend against the mob.

If so, Halcyon seemed unconscious of having given cause for offense, since he never once glanced toward Trefoil, but continued:

"Sence you're playin' engineer, 'squire, tetch him up another notch, ef ye please. Ax him to tell the rest of it; to show his hull grounds fer fetchin' sech a black charge ag'inst me, a stranger to ye all! An', as a starter, let him tell when an' whar it all come 'round."

Perry Clarkson had frowned blackly at the interference of Trefoil, but like one who felt he had gone as far as possible at that stage of the game, he stood in silent waiting until this was spoken.

"That I am willing and waiting to do," he declared, with a fine show of candor. "All I ask is ordinary justice for the dead: my hurts cut no figure in comparison."

"Ef you kin show that they come 'long of me, neighbor, I'll pay the price you set onto 'em, though, ef it bankrupts me. But I say I never laid the beft of a weenty finger onto you last night, nor done this devil's work ag'inst pore Mayfield, here."

"And I swear you had something more than a finger in both, and if I'm given a fair chance to advance my proofs, I reckon this crowd will decide that same way," cried Clarkson, fiercely.

Mayor Illingsworth now spoke up:

"You demand proof, yet refuse to listen when it is offered, sir. Now, quiet, or I'll place you under arrest, where you'll be obliged to wait your turn for speaking!"

"I'm clean squelched!" meekly murmured Halcyon, brushing away those buzzing insects from that ghastly face.

Perry Clarkson glanced over that deeply interested assembly, passing a hand across his pale face, like one striving to collect his thoughts. It was another move for the populace: it seemed so like one whose dearest thought was for simple justice, through the naked truth!

"It is barely possible, of course, that this stranger is innocent of this atrocious crime, friends," he began, speaking as one who had considered well his matter. "If so, I will be among the first to beg his pardon; if not, then I will claim a foremost hand in punishing him as the crime deserves!"

"Jest so you do the provin' fu'st, neighbor," gravely suggested Dobbs.

"I am talking to you, friends, not to the man I charge with this devilish deed, since it is *your* verdict that I ask: and now, listen:

"I have already explained how this murdered man sought my aid in carrying out his plans. I owed him a debt of gratitude, and of course I was more than willing to pay it, though I did implore him to trust all to the legal authorities of our town, who would surely treat him with—"

"But he wished to reap all the glory himself, and when my arguments along that line failed, I consented to serve him as he preferred."

"It was long after dark before he came back to me, saying that he had completed his arrangements, and that all was sure to work well, even though he had been obliged to alter his programme in a few minor details."

"His first scheme had been for me to lie in hiding at or near the spot to which he hoped to lure his game, then lend him a helping hand in case he could not overpower the one he had come so far to arrest."

"But now he said Old Halcyon could not leave his patient as early as counted upon, and that we would go first to the spot, there to lie in wait for his coming, afterward."

"Terribly 'commodatin' in me, wasn't it?" asked the stranger.

"I have nothing to do with your reasons: I am simply stating the facts as they took place. If necessary, I will kiss the Bible to each and every word that crosses my lips."

"Ef I was to ax fer more'n that, I'd hev to do it in grunts, an' grow bristles all over! Beg pardon, neighbor. You was sayin'?"

"If you think this a fit case for jesting over, I pity your judgment, sir," pointedly retorted Clarkson, pausing for a breath, in order to let that shot take full effect on the crowd.

It was a telling one, and Halcyon quickly realized as much. But, he was cool-witted enough not to make a bad slip worse, and waited for the next stroke.

"Of course I fell in with the new arrangement," resumed Clarkson. "We went to the agreed-on spot together, this foully assassinated man and myself. But neither of us ever quite reached it!"

"Just as Blakewood was pointing out to me the exact spot where he had agreed to meet his man, we were attacked by this villain—"

"Stiddy, thar!" interrupted Halcyon. "How do you know 'twas me? Did I interduce myself by face, name or figger?"

"Of course not; but, who else could it be?"

"That's jest what I've sworn to find out, an'

now you've come to the main pint—how many shots did you fire, Clarkson?"

"Not one, or you'd never be here alive! Never a shot, else ye would have crossed the range, in place of a better man!"

"Yit you're called a turrible handy sort o' man with the guns. Ef ary one doubted that afore, they couldn't well doubt it after the show you made yest'day."

"No one knows better than yourself why I failed to score," cried the gambler, twin spots of angry color leaping into his cheeks.

"Run away too sudden, did ye, pore, timid critter?"

"You lie! I was struck down before I had a chance to—"

Clarkson bit his fierce words short; but, it was too late. Old Halcyon had led him into the snare, and promptly made the most of his point.

"You was struck down so almighty sudden you couldn't find time to pick trigger, eh? An' you're called one o' the quickest men to draw an' shoot they is in this section? Then, mebber you kin tell how it happened you hed time to make me out, thar in the night-time, an' you tuck so turrible sudden?"

"Who else could it be? Blakewood gave you that precise rendezvous. I was the only other person he trusted with the dangerous secret. You alone had cause for wishing him evil. So, I repeat, you did the deed!"

"An' I say I never done it; but, sayin' hain't proof, on nuther side. It's evidence the crowd wants, an' that's what must settle it all in the eend. No prevarication now. It's solid fac's we want—nothin' else!"

"You say you was struck down! That, of course, sence you wouldn't 'a' let your pardner be butchered 'thout fightin' fer him, the hardest you knowed how. Still, mebber you'd better say it: was you?"

"Of course I was felled, since you are still living, curse you!"

"Keep your cussin' a bit longer, please. Now, who found you thar?"

"No one. The cool air revived me, at length, and as soon as I could crawl, I looked for Blakewood. He was gone, and feeling too sick to do anything more, just then, I managed to crawl to town. I stopped at the Good Times, where Trefoil—"

"What time was that, neighbor?"

"About eleven o'clock. Of course I can't be exact, to a minute."

"'Bout 'leven o'clock, you say? Then the hull business come off some time 'twixt dark an' midnight, didn't it?"

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

### THE DETECTIVE'S BURIAL.

NOT one then present but began to catch the full drift of those questions, and Clarkson lost his spots of warm color. Still, he knew he had said too much to hesitate now, and he promptly made answer:

"Yes. Between dark and midnight. I've said it, and I repeat it on oath, if that needs be."

Halcyon stood in grave waiting until that stern voice ceased, then he glanced over that assembly, asking:

"Whar's Landlord Moody? Anybody know?"

"Right here!" came the instant response, and the rather portly figure of mine host was seen struggling to force a passage through the jam. "I've been waiting for—and now, gentlemen, all!" facing the excited crowd as he reached that cleared space. "You know me, the lot of ye; and you best know whether or no I'd lie to save a guilty man."

"If anybody says this man was gone long enough from my house, last night, to turn any such foul trick as this, he lies!"

"Then you kep' 'tollable close watch of my movements, neighbor?" the stranger soberly asked.

"Of course I did, with poor Keefe only quiet while you were watching over and caring for him! Why, man, you didn't leave my house between eight o'clock, and daylight this very morning! I can swear to that, on a stack of Bibles from this to the moon!"

Another general explosion came from the gathering, but this time it contained nothing which could give Halcyon uneasiness.

Fortunately for him, Alva Moody was known to be a perfectly honest man, who would not make oath to a lie, had his own father's life depended upon his bearing false witness.

Having made his first important point, Halcyon of course lost no time in taking the offensive, one hand pointing squarely at Clarkson as he sternly spoke:

"Thar you've got your answer, critter, though doubtin' ef it's jest the caliber you wanted most! You've bin proved a liar, whether you knowed you was one or not, fer—"

"Do you dare accuse me of maliciously lying, sir?"

"Not yit, fer I'm not the same way you was. I never go off at half-cock, an' when I pull trigger, I know my lead'll go straight to the mark. That much fer you, sir. Now for them as hasn't showed thar colors quite so openly."

His left hand rested gently upon that bosom, his right hand rose until his arm was fully ex-

tended, his fingers tightly clinched as he spoke in stern, resolute, almost fierce tones:

"Ef ary one o' the dirty half-dozen as calls thar'selves the Secret Six o' Sahara, is within reach o' my voice this minnit, let 'em open thar ears, fer I'm talkin' to them, right now!"

"I cuss your evil doin's, an' scorn your turrible threats! Though you may hev held a hull section under fright, I'm a Stranger Within the Gates, an' I don't come under that class o' critters!"

"This hyar pore, murdered man, may be my twin-brother. Time was, and that not so many hours ago, that I could almost 'a' tuck my oath he was the son of my own mother, lost sight of so many years ago. I hain't none so sure he isn't, even yit. But, whether yes or whether no, he was an honest man, or he'd never come under ban of sech a dirty gang!"

"The most of you, neighbors, see an' tuck note o' the words which was writ' an' stuck fast to this pore feller. I tore them off, beca'se I wouldn't let a dog stay on exhibition like they ordered!"

"Fu'st, then, I'm gwine to see that he hes a decent burial, an' the man or men who tries to hinder me in performin' this simple duty to a brother mortal, hes got to kill me, or chaw lead him own self!"

"Ef thar isn't any men hyar with backbone 'nough to help me in sech a work of common humanity, then I'll do it by my lonesome!"

"I'm one, if there isn't another white man in town!" declared Alva Moody, stepping boldly to the side of the stranger. We've cringed and cowered too mighty long before this secret gang! I, for one, am ready to scorn their threats, and defy their vengeance!"

During this talking, Perry Clarkson had moved away, taking advantage of the confusion which followed the evidence given by the landlord. If his movements were noted, no one offered to interfere with him.

During the latter part of the exciting scene, Mayor Illingsworth had contented himself with listening and watchin', but now he came to the front, looking keenly at the cofined detective for a few seconds before speaking.

"Who knows?" he said, with the air of one who felt unable to fully decide on the spur of the moment. "This may be all a cunning trick! I can see no signs of actual violence, and—where is Doctor Blakelock?"

"On hand, just where he'd ought to be, of course!" answered that gentleman, for himself. "What do you want of Doctor Blakelock?"

"Is this anything more than—is it really a corpse?"

The physician made no immediate reply, but at once set about examining the body within the rude coffin.

In almost breathless silence the crowd waited, watching his every movement with the deepest interest. Up to the moment when that doubt passed the lips of their mayor, not one of them all had entertained such a suspicion, but now—credible as it looked on the face of it, hardly two score of all then present would have been surprised had Dr. Blakelock pronounced the man living, or no man at all!

Such an imposture was almost impossible, of course, but that very fact made those marvelous fellows give it welcome.

Dr. Blakelock made a careful examination before drawing back, satisfied as to the truth.

"What is your decision, doctor?" asked the mayor.

"The man is dead, of course. I never doubted that much: the only question to decide, was how he came by his death."

"And you have found out?"

"Certainly, or I'd be unfit for my profession, sir," responded Blakelock. "He died of *poison*. The exact drug I cannot name, of course, without making an analysis of the internal organs. This I am perfectly willing to do, however, if I am legally called upon."

There was a brief silence, broken by Illingsworth:

"I hardly think that is necessary, if you have no doubt lingering as to his actual death."

With a grim smile the medical man pointed to the flies which had gathered to their feast.

"Even they know that much!" he said. "And you will have the evidence of your own senses, too, if the body is left long exposed to the sun, out here."

Mayor Illingsworth shrunk from this professional remark, shivering perceptibly as his usually rosy countenance turned paler.

"Then, since the poor fellow is past human aid, I suppose the proper thing will be to bury him?" he said, still further betraying that emotion by his almost silly choice of words.

"That generally follows demise, I believe," retorted Blakelock, with exaggerated gravity.

He held very little love for Mayor Illingsworth, and still less reverence. He felt amply repaid for all his trouble of making that examination, by gaining the chance to openly mock his pet aversion in the face of all that gathering.

Mayor Illingsworth plainly felt that sting, but under the circumstances he did not deem it wise on his part to enter the verbal lists with the physician, and remarked, instead:



"We agree on that one point, then: the poor fellow must be buried, first of all. Then, if we are men, not curs, we will take hold of this shameful affair, and never know rest until the authors have been ferreted out and forced to pay the full penalty due their devilish crime!"

This speech was well received by the crowd in general, and the mayor felt as though he had redeemed himself.

Halcyon promptly put forward his claims as the proper one to take charge of the remains, since he was not yet convinced that the murdered man was not his own brother.

No objections were raised. As he had been cleared from all suspicion of having taken part in that tragedy, many were inclined to look upon him as something of a hero, and one of themselves, rather than as a Stranger Within the Gates, to use his own expression.

A cover was speedily prepared for the coffin, and when it was fastened firmly in place, after Halcyon had tenderly washed that face, bearing such a strong resemblance to his own, despite the slight distortion of the features caused by a painful death, a procession was formed, at the head of which the coffin was carried to the little hill lying north of the town, where a goodly number of graves were already to be noted.

It was a rude, primitive sort of burial, almost as a matter of course, since Sahara had given precious little thought to the religious needs of her citizens: churches there were none, and although a minister of the gospel was on hand, it had been many years since he deserted the pulpit for the miner's pick.

Still, he gave the assembled crowd a brief sermon, and before he was through, many sad faces were to be seen, through hearts being stirred with feelings long foreign to their owners.

Calmly, so far as outward seeming went, Halcyon acted as chief mourner; but not until after that brief sermon was over, and the murdered detective hidden from sight beneath the heaped-up dirt, did he say aught, or show signs of making the scene which nearly all of those present as spectators felt sure he would grant them before the end of all.

In silence, after the grave was completed, Old Halcyon took one of the shovels, and with its sharp corner deliberately traced an oblong space not far from and aligned with that reddish mound.

This completed, he leaned upon the handle of the shovel, removing his hat, to gaze gravely around over those expectant faces for a brief space before speaking.

When he did break that almost painful silence, his voice was deeper, more solemn than any one present had heard it before.

"I wish to give ye thanks, neighbors, for your kindness in lettin' me do the last service man kin pay to man, whether he be stranger, or the closest of kin.

"The most of you heard all that tuck place down thar, on the Plaza, I reckon, but them as didn't kin ax them as did, ef they want to know. Jest now, I hain't got time to waste in explainin' things.

"You all hev see'd what I've jest finished doin': markin' out this space, big 'nough fer to bury 'nother man o' my bigness into. I want ye to see that nobody else don't jump the claim: fer it's my claim!"

"But, what for, man alive?" demanded Alva Moody, amazed.

"Fer me, ef the Secret Six o' Sahara treats me the same way, afore I can trap 'em. Ef he's my twin, surely the two halves ought to lay together!"

## CHAPTER XXIX.

### TAKING THE FIRST STEP.

OLD HALCYON looked downward at that newly formed mound, beneath which reposed all that was left to represent the being he had so persistently termed his "other half."

His face was very serious, but his personal grief could not be read by any of those curious eyes gathered about: over all was that grave, calm composure, to which might be attributed his peculiar title.

"This'll never come to pass ef jest a common body kin foolish the dirty half-dozen," added Halcyon, after that brief pause. "But I'm sayin' so much, jest to let my last wishes be knowed by all who's hyar, fer then I'll feel as ef 'twould come to pass: that the two halves which crooked luck split so turrible fur apart, would lay whar they wouldn't hev so mighty much trouble fittin' up together when Gab'r'l toots his trumpet!"

"An' now, neighbors, jest a few words more afore we seprate to go each our own ways.

"This evil gang calls itself of Sabary. Mebbe that's a lie, fer it don't seem nat'ral to think of sech dirty devils tellin' the truth, even by accident! Mebbe it's flung out, jest to keep honest folks from lookin' in the right d'rection fer spot-tin' of 'em: see?"

"But, whether or which, don't matter to me, jest now. Even ef tha'r hain't one or more of that same gang lookin' at an' listenin' to my words this very minute, I feel dead sure tha'r is plenty of thar fri'nds inside o'

hearin' my bazoo. An' unto them I'm sayin' jest so much:

"Go tell your head devils that it's a fight to the finish atwixt tha'r black gang an' Old Halcyon! Tell 'em that the fu'st minute I kin git cl'ar from nussin' the young gent as I owe that debt, I'll take to the hunt, an' camp right on tha'r trail ontel I hev tuck full pay fer the killin' of this, my t'other half!"

Without waiting for remark or comment, id Halcyon put on his hat, let fall the shovel, turned his face toward town, and left the scene of Derrick Mayfield's burial.

No one offered to bar his way. No one seemed at all anxious to come in contact with him, even after a friendly fashion.

The strong excitement which had for so long held the citizens under its spell, was dying rapidly away, and with the burial of the real or supposed detective, their every-day disposition was coming to the front once more.

For a short time they had defied the Six Sinners, and even threatened them with lynch-law for this last atrocious crime. But now, as their blood grew cooler, the old-time superstition returned in full force, and there was something of awe blending with their curious gaze as their eyes followed that sturdy figure.

"He'll never reach his first camp' long that trail he talks so boldly about," gravely observed one of the men, to his mate. "He's a good man, I reckon, take him by-and-large, but the Six Sinners'll put him in pickle so mighty quick it'll make our heads swim!"

Few were so bluntly outspoken as this, but the speaker merely echoed sentiments which were almost general, and long before Old Halcyon gained the town, all was settled but the precise manner in which his doom was to fall.

The stranger showed nothing of this death-doom upon his face, however, as he made his way back to the Premier Hotel, mindful of the duty which he had been forced to neglect so many hours.

Mrs. Moody intercepted him, insisting on his eating something at once, since the weird discovery at the Plaza had prevented his returning to the hotel for that warm meal, and he had not given thought to bodily food since.

But, not until after he had paid a visit to the chamber where Randall Keefe was lying, would Halcyon consent. He found the wounded sport sleeping quietly, looking much more natural than at any time since receiving his hurts.

A trusty friend was watching by his bed, and Halcyon felt that he might seek the refreshment he so sorely needed.

Mrs. Moody proved an apt assistant to his now keen appetite, both providing the essentials, and alternately coaxing and scolding him into eating still greater quantities. But at length he was forced to cry enough, resolutely pushing back from the table, gravely saying:

"Thankin' ye, ma'am, an' I would ef I could, but ef I can't, how kin I? 'Tain't my heart as fails me: that's more'n willin', ma'am, but ef I was to crowd down 'nother bite, even, I'd hev to holler fer a cooper to hoop me tight!"

Alva Moody, too, took a strong interest in this stranger, as was shown by his frequently showing his face at the dining-room door, smiling and smirking, rubbing his fat hands together, giving many a meaning wink while his worthy wife was too busily employed for taking notes.

Leaving the table at last, Halcyon gravely confronted the landlord in the hall, asking him:

"Whar's your platform scales, neighbor?"

"My whar?"

"Your platform scales. Reckon I'll hev to pay fer this meal by the pound, an' then go into hidin' a week or two, jest to avertidge up!"

It was a clumsy jest, of course, but Moody laughed as heartily as though it had contained the very essence of wit. This Stranger Within the Gates had captured the landlord, soul and body, almost.

Old Halcyon was keen enough to realize this much, and having formed a good opinion of Moody's honesty and courage, whatever he might lack in discretion, quietly asked the favor of a private interview.

As a matter of course this was granted, and, locked together in a room where eavesdropping or intrusion were equally out of the question, Old Halcyon spoke with exceeding frankness, trusting Alva Moody considerably further than he had any man in Sahara, as yet.

And now that something really momentous was partly depending upon his courage, wit and discretion, Alva proved himself much more of a man than those who were merely familiar with his every-day life could or would have given credit.

"Mebbe thar won't be no need of fetchin' you into the racket, of course, pardner," Halcyon added, after having partly outlined the plan of campaign, as far as he could see it in advance, with nothing more substantial than bare suspicion for a foundation to build upon.

"But, if I'd rather mix in?" eagerly interposed Moody. "And I would, a most mighty sight, don't you see?"

"Which I'm turrible glad to see, neighbor, an' ef the thing should take sech a turn, I'll call

on ye with jest as much confarence as I'd feel into my own self: an' a man cain't well give a stronger proof ther, jest that, kin he?"

"It's a promise, then? I may help, if I can?"

Halcyon reached forth a hand, which Moody clasped with both of his, and they shook warmly, while looking squarely into each others' eyes.

The pledge would never be violated by either.

The door was unlocked, and the two men went down to the office, where Halcyon made use of pen and ink to write a few lines, which he carefully sealed, then wrote a single name across the back of the envelope: Philo Dobbs!

"Keep this safe, neighbor," he said, speaking openly, since no one was in the room but themselves. "Give it to whoever comes an' axes fer that name. Understand?"

Moody understood, and having finished his preliminary movements, Halcyon remounted the stairs, relieving the watcher over Randall Keefe.

"It's comin' pritty nigh time fer him to roust up, ye see, neighbor," was his grave explanation and excuse in one. "An' seein' as how the pore man hed tuck a powerful fancy fer me to be with him, doctor said it'd be safer ef I was—"

"I know, sir. Doc explained it all. Still, I'll be on hand if a relief is needed. Drop a word at the office, please."

The friend departed, and Halcyon resumed his watch-duty. Not for long was he left alone, but the comer was Dr. Blakelock, who greatly eased his mind on that particular score, by declaring that he was doing remarkably well: much better, in fact, than even he had hoped for.

"Of course he isn't out of danger, nor will he be for a couple of weeks to come, even with the smoothest of good luck. But, he'll worry through, if he can have good nursing, and be kept free from external excitement. Above all things, don't mention that little Plaza affair!"

Shortly after the doctor took his departure, Moody came up from the office with word that the sealed note had been called for, by a stranger to him.

"He asked for that name, and of course I had to give him the article. Was I doing right, pardner?"

"Just right," calmly assured the stranger. "An' now, as it's gittin' on pritty well to'rds sun-down, reckon you'd better git things in trim ag'inst accidents. Understand?"

"You bet I do!" declared Moody, with subdued enthusiasm, once more gripping that sun-browned hand between his own, then leaving the sick-chamber in a bustle of hidden excitement.

Halcyon resumed his watch, and when Randall roused up, a little later, no father could have ministered more tenderly to his wants than did this stranger.

Fortunately Keefe was too weak for asking many questions, and those related to Caroline Alvord exclusively. Old Halcyon answered them as the lover wished, heedless of his own ignorance on that score, and once more Randall fell asleep, peacefully as a tired child.

Shortly after dark, Moody came to the sick-chamber, with his good wife bearing him company. Mrs. Moody relieved Halcyon as watcher, and the two men passed down-stairs, leaving the hotel by a rear entrance without being seen by any person, thanks to the precautions taken by the worthy landlord.

"Wish I might go with you, pardner, but—Can't I, then?" wistfully asked the landlord.

"No, best not, neighbor. Your part is right hyar, ag'inst ary one axin' fer me. Tell 'em I'm busy with Keefe, understand?"

Without waiting for reply or remonstrance, Halcyon passed rapidly away, keeping to the darkest shadows while leaving town, passing beyond its limits without meeting any person, or, so far as he could tell, being seen by another.

He finally crouched down under cover, near a tall tree, the top of which had been broken off by some sharp storm, and there he remained hidden until after two men, followed by two others in a few minutes, had received his challenge with the correct response.

Not until the four men had proven their right, did Halcyon rise from his covert, shaking hands with the quartette, then asking:

"You have the tools, of course? Good! It's high time we were at work. Come, and keep both eyes and ears open!"

Leading the way to the little hill, Halcyon paused beside a grave.

## CHAPTER XXX.

### ROBBING THE GRAVE.

THE still damp-smelling clouds sufficiently identified the mound: it was that so recently heaped above the coffin containing Derrick Mayfield, or, rather, Elmore Blakewood.

"This is the spot," gravely announced Halcyon. "Andrus and Fields will open the grave, while Darling and Manning help me keep guard. No time to lose, lads, so fall to your work!"

Without a word of comment or dissent, the men accepted the lots assigned them by one who



certainly appeared to be their master for the time being.

Those with the tools fell to work removing the red clods, while the other couple, in obedience to a sign made by Old Halcyon, crept silently away to lower ground, crouching down with weapons in hand, and eyes roving constantly about, on guard against possible interruption.

Old Halcyon did not confine himself to any particular spot, but kept up a sort of cautious patrol, thus completing the line of watchers, and reducing the chances of discovery to a minimum.

Several times he stole back to where the grave was being opened, to note the progress made; and then, when the hole was too deep down for more than one man to handle a shovel to advantage, he sent the third man to take his place as guard, himself remaining by the grave.

"Careful, Andrus!" he muttered, a curious tremor in his tones as the shovel first struck wood. "Not too roughly! I've known less shocks than that to—*Easy, man!*"

It was little better than blind work, with only the twinkling stars to lend them light, but Andrus persisted, carefully scraping away the last few inches of soil, until the coffin was laid sufficiently bare for the next move.

"Climb out, and let me take your place, Andrus," said Halcyon, in guarded tones, taking some minor tools from one of his pockets. "Get the rope ready for use. I'll need it in a minute or two!"

Working rapidly, yet with little noise to betray his movements, Old Halcyon soon drew the nails with which the cover was fastened down, and then handed the board to his assistant, the next moment feeling with strange eagerness of that silent body thus laid bare.

"How is it, boss?" cautiously asked Andrus, but the wanderer did not reply, merely bidding him lower the rope provided for use.

Lifting the head and shoulders of the buried detective sufficiently far, Old Halcyon slipped the rope under and around the body, fastening it securely in place; then bidding Andrus call one of his mates for the final lift, he maneuvered so as to raise the limp, inert weight at its head, so he could stand in that end of the coffin.

In this manner the body was removed from the grave with comparatively little difficulty, and without putting too great a strain upon the chest around which the rope was fastened.

Climbing out, and only pausing to take one keen glance around the knoll, Old Halcyon dropped to his knees beside that form, using both hands and ears with undisguised anxiety.

"How is it, sir?" ventured one of the men, as their employer rose to his feet in silence.

"Not too late, I'm hoping?"

"Not too late, if we were ever in time," came the grave reply.

"Then he's—*not dead?*"

"Time must tell that, for it's past me, just now. We'll act as if he was living, though! Bring the litter, Manning! You and Darling will go with me, and you, lads, must restore all here to its former seeming."

The litter which had been prepared for this particular purpose, was quickly produced, and the body of the detective placed upon it, in the best position for being carried from that gruesome spot.

"You and Fields, Andrus, must refill the grave, and efface as much as possible all signs which might give rise to ugly suspicions. If you get through before I come back, lie low, and wait for my return. If any one comes this way before you have completed your work, take cover, unless they are aiming for this grave. In that case, scare them off, no matter how far you have to go; only, don't let them recognize you."

By the time Halcyon had finished giving these hasty instructions, the body-bearers were ready to lift their burden, and giving them the sign, the stranger led the way for them to follow.

Leaving the graveyard, he headed for the hills, bearing nearly northeast, moving as rapidly as his aids could follow with their burden.

In due time Halcyon called a halt, examining the body for signs of life, but without success. Then he took one end of the litter, relieving Andrus, who spelled his mate after another stretch of traveling.

In this manner there was slight loss of time, and eventually the destination which Halcyon had held in view from the first, was reached without mishap or encountering any person.

This particular refuge was a rude cavern, the mouth of which was masked by scrubby bushes and fallen rocks. With some little difficulty the litter was passed through, after which the rest was easily accomplished.

Thus far they had maneuvered entirely without artificial light, but now, knowing from prior examination, that there would be no risk in so doing, Halcyon struck a match with which to light a pocket-lantern.

By the rays cast forth from this, he bent over the body for a more critical examination, laying bare that pulseless bosom, pressing his ear above the heart, searching carefully and minutely for some token of lingering life.

But all his efforts seemed in vain!

"Looks mighty like 'twas no use!" muttered

one of the men, with a nervousness which he could not wholly disguise. "Reckon we waited too long, sir?"

"It may be so, though I saw nothing to indicate a struggle when I opened the coffin," gravely answered the stranger, drawing back, though without rising from his knees, or removing that fan of light from the ghastly face. "If he is indeed dead, then I was mistaken in the suspicion which struck me when I wiped the tinge of froth from his lips, back there on the Plaza."

"If—of course we wouldn't ask it, against your will, or your better judgment, sir," hesitated Fields.

Halcyon glanced up, with a faint smile coming into his face.

"Yet you are burning up with curiosity, all the same, eh?"

"Well, is it so mighty strange, sir?"

"'Twould be still stranger if you weren't, lads," with a return to his grave, almost gloomy manner once more. "And I'll explain; that is, as far as I am able, before I leave you this night. Just now—*Ha!*" bending lower over that face as he fancied he caught a twitching of a muscle.

If so, it had passed, just as quickly. The form lay there, nearly nude to its middle, cold and motionless as though indeed a corpse.

In only one respect did it differ. According to all mortuary laws, the death rigor should long since have taken full possession of limbs, as well as trunk, but arms and legs were fairly supple, and when Halcyon gently indented the flesh, it sprung back as before.

Repeating these significant tests, he presently observed:

"You can see for yourselves, lads: one in a trance might act just so, but never a sure-enough corpse! It was this fact that first aroused my suspicions; and later, when the doctor said poison had been used, a possible solution occurred to me. Never mind just when, or under just what circumstances, but once before I had met another such case."

"Remembering one of the tests used by the doctor in attendance on that case, I tried it here; and the scent, *the taste*, even, of that bit of froth, seemed to me exactly the same!"

"In that case the patient revived, and I hope this one will do the same thing. In that case an Indian drug was employed to produce the semblance of death, succeeding so perfectly that three skillful physicians were deceived into pronouncing the patient certainly dead!"

"There isn't time to tell you all, just as the old doctor explained it to me, but I'll say this much now, the rest later: The drug used was a peculiar preparation which the doctor called *morion*, and he said the ancient Greeks termed it 'death-wine.' It is extracted from the mandrake, and when skillfully administered, will produce such a perfect counterfeit of death as to deceive any doctor who hasn't made a specialty of the old-time poisons."

"Who could have expected to meet with it here? I'd give a good deal to know just who—and I will know!" springing to his feet, with sudden fire. "I'll probe this devilish mystery to the very bottom, and bring the authors to punishment, or die trying!"

This unusual excitement died out as swiftly as it flamed up, and speaking almost coldly, Halcyon gave the men their instructions.

"You can only watch and wait, lads. If not dead, he will recover his senses before day-dawn, I firmly believe. If he does, care for him as you would for an own brother!"

"If I am wrong, and he never rallies—well, that will be one more count against the Secret Six of Sahara, to be fully settled with me!"

"You are to remain here, to care for him. If he recovers before I return, one of you hasten direct to the Premier Hotel. If I'm not on hand, ask for the landlord, and simply say to him that you have fresh word of *Philo Dobbs*. That will be enough, for I'll post him, myself."

After a few more words of caution as to discovery, Halcyon left the cavern, hurrying off in the direction of town.

#### CHAPTER XXXI. BIRDS OF A FEATHER.

"On, don't stop to pick your terms, sir, I implore you!"

"There is no need for selection, when the right ones offer themselves so readily, Perry" retorted Hobart Illingsworth.

The dandy gambler, and the head official of Sahara, were seated opposite each other, with the round table between them. It was ornamented after the self-same fashion now as it had been when Marcus Alvord and the mayor had been in consultation, shortly after the duel between Randall Keefe and Clarkson.

Now, and then, pretty much the same subject was under debate, though with a different treatment. Then Illingsworth had been suave and soft-spoken, now he was stern, almost savage in his manner.

Also seated opposite each other, were Grace Illingsworth and Jacob Gilmore, and being at the same center-table, the little party formed a quartette, as though at cards.

None of those painted papers were visible, yet a game was being played for high stakes, and

one at least of the four, seemed to think he was on the point of being basely cheated.

The woman leaned back in her chair, a fixed smile upon her more than handsome face, but with a burning light in her large eyes which altered in degree as they turned from one man to the other.

As for Gilmore, he seemed far more deeply interested in the liquor and cigars, which were of a better quality than he was accustomed to indulge in. Being free of cost to himself, by no means lessened his enjoyment, yet he took sufficiently close note of all that passed, and held himself in readiness to chip in when it might become necessary.

"The king can do no wrong!" murmured Grace, maliciously, then adding: "Perry has worn the crown so long that it galls him sorely to be proven no better than a jack—*ahem!*"

"What have you got to say about it, I'd like to know?"

"It's more than likely you *will* know; when the time is ripe, my dear fellow. Just now, however, Uncle Hobart is reading the lecture."

"And never a man needed such a reading worse than you do, Perry!" declared Illingsworth, with a dark scowl, his fat hand forming into a pudgy fist as it struck the table between them. "When everything was running along so smoothly, why need you let that crazy-hot temper of yours run away with your common-sense? Why must you—"

"Was I to rest meekly under his brand?" sullenly interrupted the gambler. "That might suit *your* disposition, but never *mine!*"

"It's no more'n fair to say that he done his axin' afore us all," amicably hinted the city marshal.

"I know that," admitted Illingsworth, in still harsher tones. "But he took precious good care it should be broached first before Alvord, so we couldn't raise objection without too openly exposing our hand."

"I'd have done the same had the devil been your mate, sir! If not, Sahara wouldn't have held me, next day! I'd have been booted and egged out of town, if nothing worse!"

"That would have been better worth looking at than the duel," came laughingly from the woman.

"Bite your gum, girl, and let that busy your spite," sternly reproved Illingsworth. "This is hardly a matter for gibes, and you'd ought to realize as much."

"It's a matter that's past mending by empty chatter, so why not let it go at that?" surlily spoke Clarkson, flashing an ugly glance from under his wrinkled brows at the man whom, right or wrong, Sahara believed his uncle.

"It's by letting too many faults go by unproved, that you've been spoiled for anything like clean work, young fellow. It's high time you got a calling down, and I'm feeling in just the humor for administering it, too!"

"More power to your tongue, sir!" maliciously murmured Grace, in a theatrical aside.

"I'm not faulting you so much for calling Keefe out and shooting him, as I am your making another botch of it all!"

"What more could I do, then? You saw it all. You saw him drop to my gun, and unless I'm way off my nut, *yours* was one of the first hands to check me when I wanted to give him the rest of my pills!"

Perry Clarkson looked as though he had made another close shot, but Illingsworth was ready for even that.

"Of course I did, and why? Because I wouldn't have you blast what little sympathy still stuck to our side! If you'd given Keefe another dose, after the girl's coming, even those who were puckering their lips for a cheer on our side the fence, would have mobbed you, sure as fate!"

"Well, I yielded to your will, didn't I? Then, what in time are you kicking up such an infernal row about?"

"Because the time has come to make you see, what all the rest of us have realized all along, that you've got to come under the yoke, or get clear out of the game we've set out to play. Is that simple enough language for your comprehension, Mr. Clarkson?"

This question came in tones of mock politeness, which stung the gambler even more keenly than the stern chiding before. His face flushed up hotly, and his strong teeth began to show their edges through his mustache.

"Kick me out, eh? Think twice before you try anything like *that*, my dear sir! If for no other reason, because you'll never have a chance to do the thinking, later!"

"Pears like we wasn't gittin' thar in any too big a hurry, gents," gravely insinuated the city marshal. "Pears like we mought do more good then to git down to pullin' ha'r an' clapper-clawin' like so many squaws—axin' your pardon fer the words, Miss Grace!"

"Don't mention it, dear sir," with a smiling bow. "I'm enjoying myself too utterly for finding fault with a word so mild as *that*."

"You began the racket, girl, and he took it up, so—"

"It needed taking up, Clarkson, and you know as much. Mind you, I'm not saying that you ought to have borne the brand, as you



call it; I'm only kicking because you didn't take surer action."

"Didn't I do my level? And isn't Keefe out of our path?"

"No, sir, he's *not* out of the way, and I consider him far more dangerous to our cause now than ever!" harshly retorted Illingsworth.

"Bah!" with an outward fling of his hand. "You're crazy, man! I know I planted at least one blue pill where it'll do the most good. Ran Keefe will never leave the bed he's stretched on, this minute, until he's fixed for the bone-yard!"

"Blakelock swears he'll recover."

"And Blakelock took precious good care to make that prediction where it'd come right speedily to your credulous ears, my dear sir. He loves you nearly as well as Satan loves holy water, and wouldn't stick at a lie, big as a mountain, if he thought it would rub against your grain."

"I tell you, sir, Keefe has got his final. He'll never get on his feet again. He's just as good as a corpse, right now!"

"Mebbe so, but even granting you are right in this, Clarkson, he has cooked *your* goose, just as surely as though he had emptied his entire arsenal into your thick skull!"

Something in the tone of the mayor gave the gambler an inkling of the truth, and his face suddenly grew paler, while the dangerous light flashed up in his eyes at the same time.

"What do you mean by that, sir? Curse you, man! speak right out, and drop all these croaking hints!"

"Perhaps I may meet with better success, Perry," interposed Grace Illingsworth, leaning forward, her white hands tapping lightly on the table. "Uncle means just this: that Caroline Alvord is a woman."

"Of course she is, or I'd never be—"

"Patience, hot-head! And being a woman myself, I can tell you just how this little affair has altered your position in regard to her."

"She is a woman, I said. She saw you shoot her lover down, when his eyes were seeking her out from the crowd. She saw him turn from your guns, even while you were seeking his life: *turn from death to her!* That would convince her of his entire love, even had she doubted before."

"No man ever gave a better proof of his love, and just as she will never forget him for that, just so surely will she never forgive you for taking advantage of it, to shoot him down!"

Perry Clarkson listened to this swift speech with fiercely-working features. Each word seemed bitterer than gall to him, for he saw to what it was meant to lead.

As Grace Illingsworth ceased speaking, his tightly-clinched fist struck the table with a violence which caused the decanter and glasses to dance. And in vicious tones he uttered a savage oath, then added:

"I see what you're driving at, my lady, but it'll never work! I'll have the girl as part of my share, or I'll kick the fat into the fire! Is that plain enough for you to comprehend, eh?"

Up to that moment Grace Illingsworth had remained calm, so far as outward seeming went, but now her own hot temper took fire, and with a swift movement, she drew forth a long, keen-pointed dirk, causing the polished steel to flash in front of the gambler's face for an instant before the fierce words escaped her lips:

"Try *that*, you malicious cur, and I'll give you *this*—right where you live, too!"

Clarkson grasped her wrist, aiming a brutal blow at her face.

## CHAPTER XXXII.

### LAYING DOWN THE LAW.

"PLAY cat with me, will you?" he viciously snarled, in time with his swift action; but there was another on guard, it seemed.

With marvelous quickness, Gilmore caught that hand before it could mar that beautiful face, checking the stroke and shoving Clarkson back by main force, as he sternly cried:

"Shame to ye, boy! Hit a woman, who—"

The gambler twisted his hand free, but made no attempt to repeat his action. He snuk back into his chair, scowling blackly at Grace, who laughed half-hysterically as she still retained her weapon.

Hobart Illingsworth interfered, sternly commanding the peace. His efforts were all the more successful, perhaps, because both parties felt they had let their hot passions carry them a little too far.

"Of course I didn't mean to cut him," said Grace, replacing the dirk in its accustomed hiding-place. "If I had, I'd have struck before speaking. Only—I'll do just *that*, if Perry cuts up too rusty!"

"And Perry'll do worse than cut up rusty, unless he has a fair show for his band," grimly declared the gambler.

"Pears to me, all o' ye, that pritty nigh the smartest move we could make, jest now, would be to split up an' each go our own ways until the weather kin clear up a bit," gravely hinted the marshal.

"I object to that," vetoed the mayor, his tones growing cold and metallic, vastly different from those the outside portion of Sahara was most familiar with. "Too much time has been

wasted in folly, and the quicker we settle down to sober business, the better for our interests."

"I'm perfectly willing to do my part, of course, but when it comes to kicking me right out of my best pay, then I reckon it's *my* turn for making a show of foot-leather!"

"You've let your cranky temper make a holy show of yourself, Clarkson, and if you haven't ruined our scheme, you've come too mighty near it for any fun! And now—just quiet down, and hearken a bit."

"There's no need of my entering into details. You, each one of you, understand them as well or better than I could tell you."

"We've taken up a risky line of business, but the stakes are rich enough to fully justify all that. The main point is to win the game and since one trick has failed us, what better can we do than to try another line?"

Clarkson was watching as well as listening, and he fancied he saw at least a portion of what Illingsworth was so guardedly leading up to. Right or wrong, his fierce temper once more flashed forth, and in hot suspicion he demanded:

"Does that mean you're contriving some scheme to throw me over entirely, Illingsworth?"

"No, it does not mean anything of the sort, Perry. You are in the game to stay, of course, the same as the rest of us. Only, since this awkward complication has come up, we've got to do the next best thing: Grace must marry Alvord, and—"

"Bite it off, right there, sir!" sternly interposed the gambler. "I say that Grace shall do no such thing, unless I can have the girl at the same time!"

"She's a doll-faced fool, but Carry wouldn't take you, if there wasn't another man on the face of this globe," declared the woman, her face showing how much she relished that chance to prick the man who would surely have marred her facial beauty, only for the ready grasp of the city marshal.

"And you're a—an angel, of course!" mockingly retorted the gambler, with a low bow.

"Still, what I've said, I'll stick to. Both or neither! And you can make the most of that, Illingsworth."

That worthy member made no attempt to interfere with this brief passage at arms, coldly watching the younger couple, but now, as Clarkson turned his way with flat defiance in face as upon his tongue, he sternly spoke up in his turn:

"Since you insist upon it, after ruining your faintest hopes in that quarter, Perry, you can try your chance, of course."

"Thank you for nothing, dear uncle!" with a sneer.

"Wait: I say you may make the attempt, and so you can. But if you fail to carry your point within a reasonable length of time, you must make up your mind to step aside, and let us try the next best thing."

"I'll try, and I'll win, or the whole game will go to pieces!"

Then it was that Hobart Illingsworth for the first time gave evidence of his real temper. He leaned over the table, his little eyes glowing as though bits of glass, backed by living fires. He shook one fat finger before that angry face.

"You've crossed the danger-line, Perry Clarkson, just as I knew you would, thanks to that infernal temper of yours! Now—listen to me, and mark well my words, for I'll never take the trouble to repeat them for your benefit:

"You can try your hand once more. If you succeed in winning the girl over to marrying you, legally, of her own free will, all right; so let it be! But, mind you this: if you fail, and then try to spoil the game by way of getting even, I'd send you to fill a high lot on the hillside, even though you were my own son!"

Perry Clarkson was far from being a coward, speaking after the ordinary fashion, but now he actually quailed before those glowing orbs and that flushed face. Or—was it that fat, pudgy hand?

For, as he ceased speaking, Hobart Illingsworth lifted his right hand from the table, making a peculiar gesture in the air directly in front of the gambler's face.

Clarkson shrunk quickly back, the flush of anger fading swiftly out of his face. He shivered like one smitten with a sudden chill. It was a startling contrast to his fierce, overbearing demeanor of a few seconds earlier, but the alteration seemed permanent.

For a brief space Illingsworth maintained that position, then he drew back, settling down in his easy-chair with just the shadow of a smile coming into his face as he noted the effects of his words, or of his gesture, whichever might be the prime cause.

"You would have it, Clarkson, and if it sticks in your craw, thank that devilish temper of yours. I tried reason and argument, but they were cast over your shoulder."

"What have I done to deserve—"

"It's not so much what you've *done*, as what you threatened to do," came the ready interruption. "And yet, if it hadn't been for the ugly

tangles you've tied across our road with that same temper, I hardly reckon I'd have used the final clincher."

"Well, I did the best I knew how, and even *you* can't deny that."

"Never mind: let that part of it drop, for the present. We're here to talk over business, and business it shall be. You still demand another chance, then?"

"Yes, I do. I didn't care so mighty much, first-off, but now—I'd rather have the girl than all the rest of it!"

"Very well: take your chance, and make the utmost of it. If you win all right. If you lose, you will fall back, and give some one else a chance. That much is fully understood, isn't it, Clarkson?"

"I reckon it's got to be, since you fling the sign in my face," was the reluctant, sullen answer.

"Nothing less seemed able to cool you off, my boy, and with so much at stake, we couldn't afford to run any extra chances. Matters have come to a point, now, where a single slip may easily ruin all, and you are principally to blame for that, as you will be ready to admit when you've worked off this unusually cranky fit of yours."

Illingsworth paused, but Clarkson had no retort ready. That mysterious sign had cowed him for the time being, if not permanently.

Presently he spoke, and more in his ordinary tones:

"Well, I'll make the best of it, since that's all I can get. Now, about this forlorn hope of mine. I'm to use the means I think best, of course?"

"Unless they are such as to still further imperil our scheme, yes."

"Wouldn't it be just as well to ask what those means are, though?" quietly suggested Grace Illingsworth.

"'Twould choke you, if you couldn't chip, wouldn't it, beauty?" the gambler snarled, showing his teeth viciously.

"Never mind her, Perry, for I was just going to ask the same question," quickly spoke up Illingsworth. "Answer it, please. There's nothing like having matters fully understood as we go along."

"Well, since you put it that way, all right. There isn't any harm in my getting old Alvord to back my suit, I reckon!"

"Not unless you are thinking of gaining that backing by too plainly showing our cards."

"I'll hardly do *that*, you may be sure."

"Nor would I mention it, only for your cranky actions during the past day or two. If it cuts, blame the right person: and his name is Perry Clarkson."

"For the time being!" maliciously amended Grace.

"Quiet, girl," sternly reproved Illingsworth. "No need to make a bad smell worse, by constantly stirring it up. Go on, Clarkson."

"I don't know as I've got anything more to say," and as he spoke, the gambler rose to his feet, picking up his hat as though on the point of taking his departure. "Unless—How much time do you give me?"

"Forty-eight hours, no more. If you can't turn the trick in that limit, you must step aside and give others a chance."

## CHAPTER XXXIII.

### A BRIDE FOR A BRIDE.

PERRY CLARKSON left the room and the house without trusting himself to answer that repeated sentence: to do so could hardly help his case any, and if he once gave free swing to his rash tongue, the results might be still more disagreeable to himself.

Night had fallen since that rather stormy council had convened, and when once fairly clear of the Illingsworth place, the gambler paused like one in doubt, now looking toward town, now gazing in the direction of the Alvord residence, which was still further away from the town proper.

"It's growing rather late for such a call, but I reckon the old man will be out of bed, and then—Curse the soxy knave! Pushing Grace to the front, while all the time it's *his* sweet tooth that aches!"

Right or wrong, Clarkson fancied he had penetrated Hobart Illingsworth's real purpose in "calling him down" so sharply that evening.

"He's watering at the mouth after Carry, eh? And I must draw off, so *he* can prance over the track? And lugs in the sign which—"

Clarkson left that sentence unfinished, even in his mind. It was a dangerous point to touch upon while his blood was flowing so hotly, and as the quickest method of driving it out of his thoughts by admitting other food, he turned and moved rapidly away toward the house in which the Alvords made their mountain home.

Lights were shining through several of the curtained windows, telling him the little household had not all retired for the night, and a gentle rapping at the front door quickly brought the wealthy mine-owner to the portal.

His greeting was anything but enthusiastic as he recognized his caller, and he omitted an invitation to enter. This ought to have warned Clarkson the season was unpropitious, but it produced the opposite effect: obstinate by



nature the gambler grew only more determined as obstacles seemed to increase in his pathway.

"It's hardly right to crowd in, Mr. Alvord," he said, coolly, as he crossed the threshold. "But I have a little matter of business which can hardly be postponed. You will grant me a minute or two, I'm sure."

"Certainly, only—step lightly, my dear sir, for poor Carry is not feeling the very best in the world."

Clarkson said nothing on this point until the two men were seated in a cozy little apartment where the mine-owner received his particular friends, and did the most of his business dealings.

With all its strength, Marcus Alvord had a face which almost too faithfully reflected his mind, and as he looked into that face, Clarkson felt his case was rapidly growing desperate.

It was not difficult to give a pretty shrewd guess as to the main reason for this, although even Clarkson failed to understand the case exactly as it stood against him.

"Pray, sir, how is Miss Carry this evening?"

"Poorly, very poorly. She's had a terrible shock, Clarkson, and I'm afraid you've ruined what little chance you ever had for—"

"Don't say that, sir!" came the swift interposition. "I can't bear to hear you say it!"

"If hearing comes so hard, what will the reality be?"

"Heaven on earth, I'm hoping, sir! I'll make up for all that's gone before, and by the time she's been my wife a year, I'll guarantee you'll not be able to find a brighter, happier girl in the whole world!"

Mr. Clarkson spoke with enthusiasm, but it was hardly contagious. If anything, Marcus Alvord's face looked still more gloomy, and there was precious little encouragement in that voice for a lover to feed his hopes upon.

"That's easy to say, Clarkson, but I don't believe even you can really think it'll ever come to pass, after all you've done, of late."

"Pray, sir, what enormous sins have I been guilty of?"

"There's no need to particularize. If nothing else, there is your shooting Keefe down, right before her eyes! That has forever ruined your chances in her direction, and you ought to be keen enough to realize as much, without being told."

"Have you forgotten how eager you were to carry Keefe my challenge, that night, Mr. Alvord?"

"No. I forget nothing. I'm not saying that Keefe didn't deserve all he got, and more too, but when my poor little girl saw him—you lost your one chance, Clarkson, and that's flat!"

"You really mean this, then, Mr. Alvord?"

"It's not so much my meaning, as it is hers: can't you understand?"

"I'm afraid I'm beginning to understand only too well, sir," rejoined the gambler, holding his fierce passions remarkably well in hand. "It begins to look as though you were stocking the cards against me, sir!"

"Not that: don't think it," the mine-owner hastened to declare. "I'm just as much in your favor as I ever was. Only—well, to put it bluntly, as perhaps is best—Carry is flatly against you, and the mere mention of your name is enough to set her off, half-wild!"

"I'm sorry for that, sir, and almost as much on your account as on my own."

"On my account?"

"That's what I said, Mr. Alvord. And since you've set me the example for plain speaking, here's a bit for you: it's got to be both or neither!"

Alvord flushed, yet stared at the gambler like one who hardly understood his full meaning. Clarkson saw this, and promptly elaborated his meaning.

"I came here to plead, not to threaten, Mr. Alvord; but since you prefer to meet me on that level, I'll accept it. I swear that you shall never mate with Grace Illingsworth, unless Carry becomes my wife!"

The stroke could hardly be said to come unawares, but Alvord felt it none the less keenly. Life without Grace seemed worse than a blank, and it may be that he gave Perry credit for greater influence over the actions of that young lady than he was strictly entitled to.

Still, it galled him sorely to have a fellow like Clarkson bring such threats against him, and he promptly hinted as much.

"That's all right, or, if not right, why did you begin?" bluntly retorted the gambler. "I came here with a pocketful of peace, but if you insist upon war, I'll meet you on that level, too! And as the first shaft from my quiver, I'll say it over again: a fair exchange is no robbery, and I'll give you Grace for Caroline!"

"Who gave you the power to make any such offer, Mr. Clarkson?"

"That isn't in the deal, my dear sir. It ought to be enough for you to know that what I say I can perform. And so, once more: help me win my bride, or make up your mind to lose the one your lips are watering for."

There was a brief silence, during which the eyes of the mine-owner remained cast down, their owner in deep, troubled thought.

He was an honorable man in most things, but

Grace Illingsworth had completely fascinated him, and he felt that life would be worse than a blank, unless it might be shared with her.

Of course he had not forgotten the interview recently held with Mayor Illingsworth, where that gentleman proposed throwing Clarkson over in favor of himself; but surely Perry would not speak so confidently without knowing he held ample power?

"It's easy enough, once you take the right look at it, sir," Clarkson said, in more placable tones. "You can readily win Carry over to my side, I reckon, but if not—well, you're her father, aren't you?"

"Of course I am, but that doesn't make me a brute! I'll never try to force her inclinations, even to make myself a winner!"

"You'd rather see her mate with that infernal Keefe, then?"

"I don't say that, either: but this much I do say: while he lives, Carry will never look with love upon any other man!"

Then the gambler's hot temper fairly broke bounds, and springing to his feet, he viciously cried:

"That devil! She's worse than crazy if she has anything more to do with him, and you're—I say, Alvord, are you entirely blind?"

"What do you mean by asking such a question, Clarkson?"

"What do I mean? That you are worse than a blind idiot, if you permit this foolish fancy to run along further! I mean that Ran Keefe is a member of the Six Sinners, even if he isn't the head-center himself!"

"What? I can't believe it, much as I dislike the fellow!"

"It's gospel truth, though, as I'll prove to you before the end. And now, I'll leave you to chew upon this sweet morsel: Carry must marry me, or you shall never clasp Grace in your arms as a wife!"

Although Clarkson had not said nearly all he intended when coming to the place, he turned abruptly away now, afraid to trust himself further. His always unruly temper had mastered him so far he dared not linger, lest it make a bad matter worse.

Alvord did not seek to detain him, but the gambler paused at the threshold to add another word:

"Don't forget it, sir. I'll help you, if you help me. If you refuse to aid me in winning Carry, then I'll ruin your hopes with Grace, if it costs me my very life! I'll see you again in the morning, after you've taken time for thinking it all over."

Clarkson left the Alvord place, walking moodily toward town, but before he was fairly inside the limits, a dark figure leaped upon him without warning, grasping his throat firmly, as both fell together!

#### CHAPTER XXXIV.

##### BREAKING DOWN HIS NERVE.

LOST in thought as he had been, Perry Clarkson was taken completely by surprise, and before he could rally sufficiently to bring forth his powers, the breath was fairly knocked out of him by a heavy fall, to which his assailant added his own weight.

Dimly the gambler heard a sharp whistle, and instinctively realizing the truth, he strove to free himself, or to grasp a weapon to use upon that unknown enemy, before aid could come to render his capture or slaying certain.

But everything was against him. That heavy fall had temporarily paralyzed him, and sinewy hands were tightening about his neck, shutting off this wind and effectually preventing a cry which might have brought Marcus Alvord forth to the rescue.

Two other dark shapes rushed to the spot, and the gambler was quickly bound and gagged; then, as strong hands partly raised him from the ground, a heavy cloth of some description was drawn closely about his head and face.

"It's a streak of luck I wasn't expecting," said the first assailant, giving a low laugh as he helped his aids lift Clarkson to his feet. "But I reckon we can stand it, eh, my lads?"

"What'll we do with him, boss?"

"March him out of the danger-limits, first of all," came the prompt reply. "Catch hold, one on each side. If he turns balky, I'll do the spurring act!"

The speaker was none other than Old Halcyon, but as Clarkson was just then in poor condition for critical observation, and he had never heard the stranger use his natural voice, save in rude dialect, there was little danger of the gambler's making the full discovery, just then.

Still, he showed some reluctance to help in his own captivity, but when the keen point of a knife tickled his rear, far too sharply for comfort, he staggered forward, guided by a stout fellow on each side.

As Old Halcyon had declared, this was an unexpected bit of good-fortune, but which may be readily accounted for.

After leaving the cavern to which the resurrected detective had been conveyed, the stranger hurried toward town, by way of the grave-yard where two of his men had been left, refilling the rifled grave. Taking them up, as

their task was completed, he veered a little from the nearest course, meaning to call at the Alvord place, to ask concerning Caroline, knowing how pleased Randall Keefe would be to receive word direct from her.

Instead, he recognized Perry Clarkson just taking his departure, and at once resolved on effecting his capture, as his first actual step toward closing his nets.

The gambler rapidly recovered from the shock of that fall, but he too fully realized his helplessness against such long odds, to begin a useless fight. Instead, he strained his ears to catch every word, hoping from them to learn into whose hands he had fallen, reserving his bodily strength for the time when he might make an effectual break.

But Old Halcyon was far too shrewd to expose his hand prematurely, and his men were too well trained for a hint at caution to be necessary. So the captive had his pains for his reward.

He was hurried along until nearly at the cavern, when Old Halcyon bade his men wait his return, hastening on in advance. His guarded signal was promptly answered by one of those left in charge of Elmore Blakewood, and in another minute the stranger was hearing joyous news.

The detective who was supposed to have met death at the hands of the Six Sinners of Sahara, had showed unmistakable signs of life soon after the departure of Old Halcyon, and was now able to sit up and to talk, though seeming considerably dazed as a result of his drugging!

"Better yet!" ejaculated the stranger, pressing on to see for himself. "I surely was right as to the drug, and if so, he'll be himself again before long! Then—we've got the Six Sinners foul!"

Of course Perry Clarkson could know nothing of all this, and when, after nearly an hour's delay, Old Halcyon returned to the place of waiting and bade his men bring their charge along, he could only give vague guesses at what fate held in store for himself.

He knew that he was being taken into a cave of some description, by the rough rocks over which he had to be shoved, and the change of atmosphere; but for some little time, that was all he could tell. His head remained muffled, his jaws gagged, his arms bound behind his back.

In addition to this, stout thongs were wrapped snugly around his ankles, and after being placed in a sitting position with his back supported by a rock, a rope was secured around his middle, tying him to the boulder, thus hampering him most effectually.

He could dimly hear human feet shuffling around, grating on the coarse sand and gravel with which the cavern was thickly strewn, but not an articulate word came to his muffled ears.

Then the cloth was removed from his head, the string of the gag was cut, and that unsavory morsel jerked from between his aching jaws.

He saw a dimly lighted cave, with a number of human shapes: just six, as he quickly ascertained!

The number gave him a nervous start, and as he looked closer, with eyes regaining something of their usual keenness, he saw that each shape was muffled to the shoulders, seemingly with black cowls.

"The council is in session, brothers," sounded a deep, hollow-toned voice. "Is there any work to come before the league?"

Once more Clarkson gave a start, and a smothered cry rose to his throat. The sound, husky and indistinct though it was, proved sufficient to draw attention his way, and that voice once more sounded aloud:

"Who is this intruder? By what right is he a witness to our meeting in secret session?"

"By the right of a sinner on trial for his life, master," came the reply, as another muffled figure stepped forward.

"What crime does he stand charged with, brother?"

"With many, master. Among them, being a member of the Satanic Six—the League known to mankind as the Six Sinners of Sahara."

"A lie!" gasped the prisoner, suddenly flinging all his muscular strength against those bonds, hoping against hope to break away, and thus earn a chance to fight for the life which he felt was at stake.

Not a hand was lifted to stay his struggles. Silent and motionless as statues the mysterious six watched and waited. And this very quiet did more than ought else to subdue the gambler, for it told him how impotent he was just then.

"I'm not! I'll swear by all men hold holy and sacred, I'm not one of that evil gang!" he cried, his tones husky, almost terrified.

"He bears false witness, master," coldly asserted his accuser. "He is a member of the Secret Six, and no longer ago than last night, he and his evil associates in crime, committed murder most foul!"

"I never—I didn't even know—"

"After what fashion, brother?"

"By condemning an honest man who was simply obeying orders given him by his superiors. By executing him, and then adding insult to injury, by placing him upon exhibition in the streets of Sahara, covered with their cowardly



placards, branded with their infernal signature!"

"What have you to say to these grave charges, Perry Clarkson?"

"I never! It's all a pack of vile lies! Loose me from here, and I'll prove my innocence by making you liar swallow his own words!"

"You are ready to make oath that you are not, never was, a member of the Secret Six of Sahara?"

"Ten thousand oaths—yes!"

"And if you commit perjury in so swearing, you are willing to pay the full penalty due such a crime?"

"Even that, yes!" desperately cried the gambler, though he was unable to entirely conceal the start that significant question gave him.

"Enough, lying dog!" harshly thundered he who was called master, lifting his right hand with a menacing gesture. "You have condemned yourself by those words! You are doomed—doomed—doomed!"

In deep tones the five others echoed that fatal word, and despite the iron nerves of which he had so often boasted, Perry Clarkson shrank and shivered, his brows damp with what might prove the dew of death itself!

"As high Heaven hears me, gentlemen, I never had part or lot in that work," he declared, vainly striving to render his tones clear and even.

"If I did, may lightning blast—"

"Hold, impious sinner!" sternly cried the master. "Call not upon the finger of the Almighty to strike ye down with all your crimes red upon your head!"

"But, I never—never helped, even!" persisted Clarkson, hardly knowing what words passed his lips, yet feeling that he was forever lost unless he could convince these dread beings of his innocence.

"The prisoner lies, master," asserted the accuser. "Still, to prove which is right, he or I, exert your powers, oh, dread master! Call upon the grave to vomit forth its dead! Bid the sealed lips to unlock, and the death-chained tongue to bear evidence! I ask this, oh, master, in common justice to all!"

"So it shall be, brother! Grave, yield up thy fruit! Death, surrender thy claims! Step forward, ye murdered one, to confront thy assassin!"

A dark shape advanced, lifting its cowl, and a light was suddenly flashed upon it: pale, corpse-like, crimson-branded, the face of the collared detective! And, with a hoarse scream, the criminal broke down!

#### CHAPTER XXXV.

##### AN INQUISITIVE DETECTIVE.

ON the morning following the little council meeting, during which he had given Perry Clarkson a fair intimation of what he might expect to befall, in case of obstinacy, Hobart Illingsworth was seated in his home office, in company with Grace.

Neither was talking, though both faces bore signs of recent words which could hardly have been the most amicable, or the most agreeable on record.

Not that the worthy couple had been quarrelling with each other: far from it. Mutual ties had never been stronger than right now, when they knew trouble menaced them from the most dangerous quarter: within their own ranks.

Knowing as they did that Perry Clarkson would lose no time in beginning his play for a bride, they had confidently anticipated a visit from him that morning, to report progress. And if not from him, then one from Marcus Alvord.

Yet here it was, fast growing toward noon, and not a word or a sign from either man!

"It means mischief, to a dead moral!" predicted Grace, who could manipulate the slang with the best of them, when there was no necessity for her to stand on her dignity. "If the old colger doesn't show up before noon, you'd better drop in on him, to see what's up."

This was only one of the minor points over which the couple had been talking, but for some length of time, now, they had been sitting in silence, with ample food for thought.

A sharp, rapid knocking at the front door startled them both, and Grace instinctively lifted a hand to her glossy hair, while Illingsworth hurriedly said:

"It may be, but if so, only give him a word in passing. Leave us, then, and I'll finish up my part of the job!"

The mayor hurried to the door, opening it, with his "ready made" smile on duty, but instead of Marcus Alvord, a stranger stood revealed.

"Good-morning, sir," that stranger said, with a polite bow. "Am I addressing Sahara's mayor, Mr. Illingsworth?"

"Yes. What can I do for you, sir?" rather curtly answered the other.

"Grant me five minutes of your valuable time, please. And since it is fully as much for your interests as mine, permit me to step inside."

With cool audacity, yet with a bland smile upon his smug countenance, the stranger entered the hall, although in order to accomplish this

much, he had to actually push Illingsworth a little to one side.

"May I ask—"

"My apology, is yours, dear sir, without the asking," smoothly volunteered the stranger, producing a notebook as he added: "I was directed to you, as mayor, and as the person who could give me information I sought concerning the strange event which startled your town yesterday morning. This will show you why I feel interested, I believe."

He handed Illingsworth a card, on which was printed a name, and at the bottom of which was written a line.

"A detective!" ejaculated the mayor, glancing from card to face.

"Exactly," with a slight bow. "And being such, here on what may easily prove dangerous business to more sides than one, I thought it nothing more than fair play toward you, sir, to give as slight occasion as might be for connecting your name with mine. Do I make my meaning sufficiently clear, dear sir?"

"You mean that your movements are watched?"

"They may be, although I have seen nothing to indicate such an espial," promptly assured the stranger, who apparently liked the sound of his own voice, judging from his smoothly flowing periods. "Still, one filling the position I occupy, can not be too much on guard, particularly when a bit of carelessness on his part might easily cast suspicion or even vengeance upon another: yourself, for instance."

"I can't understand just why—what is it you want of me, sir?"

"What information you can give me concerning the individual known as Derrick Mayfield, during his brief sojourn at Sahara. But—"

The door opened at one side of the hall, and Grace Illingsworth came into view. The sound drew the eyes of the stranger that way, and his hat came off, with a respectful bow.

Grace looked keenly at the unexpected caller, but there was nothing on which to fasten suspicion, save that one point of being an unknown.

He appeared to be thirty or thirty-five years old, well-built, well-dressed in substantial clothes. His face was smooth shaven, with strong, clear-cut features, softened in a goodly degree by the bland smile which appeared a second habit with him.

Although the stranger could hardly have suspected as much, he was on trial, just then. If Grace disapproved, he would never have taken a further step inside that house, without fighting for the advance.

But Hobart Illingsworth looked in vain for the secret "danger sign," and receiving another in its place, instantly altered his manner to correspond.

"My niece, Miss Illingsworth, sir," he said, with a gentle gesture. "Mr. Arthur Dickson, Grace."

Both parties bowed politely, and then the lady glided to the foot of the stairs, leaving the passage clear for the gentlemen, saying:

"If anything should be wanted, uncle, please call me."

She passed swiftly up the flight, followed by a respectfully admiring gaze from the stranger, as he followed Illingsworth's lead toward the little office, as it may properly be called.

Closing the door behind them, the mayor bowed his caller to a seat, dropping into one on the opposite side of the center-table, a look of grave expectation upon his florid face.

Mr. Dickson evidently read that look aright, for he promptly said:

"I'll waste no more of your valuable time than I can help, Mr. Illingsworth, and so—pray what can you tell me about Derrick Mayfield?"

"First, may I ask why you come to me for information, sir?"

"Because you are Mayor of Sahara, and of course must know all that any honest man can know concerning this atrocious crime. You can rest assured, my dear sir, that I'd call first on the guilty parties, if I had so much as a single clew to their identity."

"Please tell me why you appear so deeply interested, Mr. Dickson, and then I'll know better what points I can supply," quietly said the mayor.

"Just as you prefer, my dear sir. I was merely trying to spare your valuable time, by at once getting at the kernel."

"The man who gave his name here as Derrick Mayfield, and who was so atrociously done to death night before last, was really named Elmore Blakewood, and was a detective, employed by the Pinkerton Agency, at Chicago, Illinois."

"He had been working for the better part of a year on a murder case; details of which I will supply, later, if you wish. A promising clew brought him to this place. He believed he had found his man, but when he came to study his surroundings, he realized that it would be little short of suicide on his part to attempt an open arrest."

"He kept in the background, waiting for an answer to the report he sent in to the Agency. In that report, he stated that he had surely run his game to earth, but that he was now con-

nected with a gang of daring knaves, to whom murder seemed an ordinary pastime, and who would never permit one of their number to be taken away, under arrest."

"Such being the case, Blakewood requested reinforcements without delay, stating that he would keep under cover until such could arrive, and make sure the wanted man did not escape."

"In response to this appeal for help, I was ordered to the front, with ample powers to enlist such force as I might deem necessary, after taking a careful look over the ground. I lost no time on the way, traveling without a break from Chicago to Sahara; but, as you know, I have arrived too late to save poor Blakewood!"

Through all this, Hobart Illingsworth listened, his face just grave enough to fit the case, but without the faintest trace of anxiety or uneasiness such as one criminally connected with that dastardly outrage might well be expected to betray.

He said nothing until Detective Dickson ceased speaking, and then his tones were smooth and even as he made reply:

"Doubtless the lawless gang to which your unfortunate friend made allusion, sir, was the secret organization which we know of best as the Six Sinners. Did he mention any names in his report, do you know?"

"As being connected with that gang, you mean?"

"Of course."

"No, sir. I saw his report before starting out to join him. He simply said that he had gathered a number of important clues, which would keep him busy until assistance could reach him. He did say that he had good reasons for thinking his particular game belonged to the Six Sinners, but that was his most elaborate statement concerning the gang."

"That is unfortunate, very!" gravely said Illingsworth, his brows gathering in a frown. "If he held any actual clues to their identity, I greatly fear they are lost forever!"

"What one man has done, another may hope to accomplish in his turn, my dear sir," blandly answered Dickson. "And with your valuable aid, backed by such others as you may vouch for, I have no fears as—"

His glib sentence was cut short by the angry scream of a woman, coming from just without the door, followed by a brief struggle!

#### CHAPTER XXXVI.

##### GATHERING IN THE SINNERS.

HOBART ILLINGSWORTH instantly recognized the voice of Grace, and realizing something of the truth, he sprang to his feet with a fierce curse, flashing forth a wicked-looking blade—only to go down that same instant before a pantherish leap as Detective Dickson crossed the table at a single bound, one hand grasping the mayor's throat, the other gripping his wrist and holding that ugly weapon harmless.

At almost the same instant, the hall door was flung wide, and two men dashed to the assistance of their superior officer.

Their help was hardly needed, however. Hobart Illingsworth seemed little more than an infant in that muscular grasp, and having fallen flat on his back, with that human catapult coming down on top of him, the mayor was more than half stunned.

His hands were brought together, and a pair of handcuffs snapped upon his wrists. A swift, practiced hand promptly removed such weapons as he carried on his person, and not until then did Detective Dickson rise to his feet, or utter another word.

"All right, Andrus?" he asked, with a keen glance around.

"All right, sir," came the prompt reply. "We caught the woman with an ear glued to your keyhole, and thought to have taken her without an alarm. But she's something of a cat, herself, for quickness, not to mention claws or yowling!"

"No one hurt, I hope?"

"Not to say hurt, sir," moving his arm a bit. "I've got a scratch, but we didn't give her slack enough for a fair blow. Ready for the next move, sir, whenever you are."

"Fetch the lady in here, please, Andrus."

This request was promptly obeyed, and as Grace, her wrists in irons as well, caught sight of Illingsworth, just being lifted to his easy-chair, she burst into a frenzy of words, which were bad enough to hear, but would be a great deal worse to see in print.

In this outburst, she was very ably seconded by Hobart Illingsworth, although that gentleman was rather short of breath during the first minute or two following his downfall.

With an aggravating smile playing about his strong mouth, Detective Dickson waited during the heat of this storm, actually appearing to enjoy that sulphureous shower, possibly because he anticipated gleaming a few important facts from among it all.

If so, he was fated to be disappointed. Although man and woman both raved and cursed at being so vilely treated, neither one was mad enough to drop matter which could actually incriminate them.

Hobart Illingsworth was not so furious but



that he could see so much, and harshly cried to Grace:

"Be still, girl! And you, you villains, what does this vile outrage mean?"

"Among other things, that the jig is up, and you are downed," retorted Detective Dickson. "Come, my dear friends, you might as well make the best of a mighty bad matter. I can't exactly promise you immunity from punishment through your turning State's evidence, but it certainly will not go any further toward stretching your necks if you make a clean breast of this nasty business."

"I don't know what you mean, sir, but this I do know: if there is justice in the land, I'll—"

"Pull hump! Just so," interrupted the detective. "On second thoughts, I'd a little rather you kept your lips closed, until we can have the entire family in session. Then, if one member tries to lie on any other, we'll have some sort of a check on unruly tongues. See?"

His tone, more than his words, blanched the florid cheeks of the mayor, and without waiting for an answer, Detective Dickson gave his men an understood signal, which resulted in two of them caring for Grace, while the other couple cared for Illingsworth.

First, a neat gag was applied to each of the prisoners, then they were lifted bodily from their seats, and carried after Dickson, who led the way from the room, into the hall, from thence proceeding to the kitchen at the rear of the building.

Here he opened a door leading to the cellar by means of a flight of stairs, producing a pocket-lantern which lighted their further way.

By this aid, and moving like one who had received careful instructions concerning the lay of the ground, the detective quickly found a cunningly hidden door, which opened to his pressing on a spring.

A narrow, dark passage was revealed, and then the light flashed upon still another door, only a few feet ahead.

This barrier promptly yielded to Dickson's manipulations, and stepping inside, he held the light so as to guide his followers.

Bearing their prisoners, the four men entered, depositing them in the place indicated by their superior officer.

Stout thongs were applied to their ankles, and both woman and man were placed too far apart to ever get together through rolling over and over.

"Not that it would matter much if they did," grimly said the detective, as he gave this explanation. "We'll hardly leave them alone long enough for them to work mischief, and with their jaws gagged, they surely can't agree upon a fairy tale in advance!"

The party retraced their steps, carefully closing the doors, leaving all precisely as they had found it. And then, when once where daylight would suffice, Dickson pocketed his lantern, and spoke commandingly:

"You have been here the longest, Darling, and know the ropes well enough to play your part. Then, too, your carrying the league signal wouldn't be so apt to cause suspicion, as might any of the others. You are ready to take the job, of course?"

"Of course, sir, since you wish it," was the quiet response.

Detective Dickson produced a notebook from an inner pocket, from which he extracted several small slips of paper, cut in a peculiar shape, but without bearing mark or writing of any description.

"I've told you enough to enable you to spot your men, Darling, so there's no need of repeating all that. You will look up these fellows, beginning with the city marshal, Jacob Gilmore. Find him, give him one of these slips of paper, taking care that no one else sees what you are passing. Understand?"

"I understand, sir," answered the man. "If he asks me any questions?"

"You needn't give him time for that. Just pass the paper, then rack out. Still, if he should corner you, as may possibly happen, simply put on your foolish look, and say the mayor bade you give him the slip."

"All right, sir, I'll follow instructions to the letter. And after baiting Gilmore?"

"Trefoil, for choice. But wait until Gilmore has had time to run his neck into the halter. You can shadow the marshal, to make sure. We can't afford to take any extra chances, you understand?"

"All right, sir. I'll work the trick the best I know how."

"Which will be to the queen's taste! Now, rack out, and we'll be on hand to welcome the genial marshal when he comes this way!"

Darling proved fully equal to the delicate and dangerous task assigned him by Detective Dickson, and really handled it so dexterously that a description would be little more than giving in detail the directions already recorded as coming from his superior officer.

With the house completely at their service, thanks to the arrests already made, there was little danger of the ambushade being discovered before it was ready to be sprung by the detective and his aids.

From his point of watching at a curtained

window, Detective Dickson caught sight of the city marshal hastening toward the house, and at once warned his men in the hallway.

Gilmore paused to rap at the door, but Dickson called forth for him to enter, imitating the voice of Hobart Illingsworth so perfectly that suspicion was impossible, and stepping over the threshold, Gilmore was instantly assailed by the four men, two standing at each side of the entrance, and Dickson casting a heavy blanket over his head as their first move.

Still, the marshal made a fierce struggle for a few seconds, but he was too closely hampered to grasp a weapon, and his capture was perfected without material harm on either side.

Irons were placed upon his wrists, bonds about his ankles, a gag between his jaws, then he was stowed away for the time being in the kitchen, where he could not possibly alarm those yet to be trapped.

Half an hour later, Harry Trefoil was treated in precisely the same manner, and with even greater ease. For once in his career, the "Undertaker Sport" was downed without making a record!

More than an hour elapsed before the next and last victim put in an appearance, but Detective Dickson showed no trace of worry or impatience. He had implicit confidence in Darling, and knew that "Tony" Anderson would never dare refuse, or neglect, to obey such a summons as the one handed him.

His capture was the easiest of all, just as his muscular powers were slightest, and when he was effectually hampered, Detective Dickson once more called his pocket-lantern into play.

The prisoners were carried to the subterranean apartment, where they were deposited where they could give no trouble. Then Dickson said:

"All here, save one, and he'll come in good time, my friends. Then, hol for the last session of the Six Sinners of Sahara!—the Satanic Six!"

#### CHAPTER XXXVII.

##### A BITTER EYE-OPENING.

DETECTIVE DICKSON left two of his men in the subterranean apartment with the prisoners, one to act as guard, and the second to act as company, as he jestingly put it. The other couple he left in charge of the house, above-ground, bidding them keep it closed, and to admit none without they voluntarily showed a passport from his hand.

"We've got the chief sinners," he said, "but there's no telling how many of minor degree may be prowling round on the loose. They may catch wind of something, or may come on business with Illingsworth, but if you keep properly on guard, they can't work any damage before I can get back, to put on the finishing touches."

Leaving the house, Detective Dickson made his way directly to where Marcus Alvord lived, and shortly after rapping at the door, was seated with the mining magnate in the same room where Perry Clarkson had made his last bold stroke for a bride.

After introducing himself in pretty much the same manner as at the mayor's residence, the gentleman from Chicago added:

"If you could, Mr. Alvord, would you lend aid and comfort to a band of criminals dastardly enough to commit such a hideous outrage as this last affair looks on the face of it?"

"What do you mean, sir, by asking me such a question as that?"

"No harm to you, sir, be sure. Then, if you could do so, you would even lend a hand to fetch all such villains to justice?"

"Try me, and see for yourself!"

"That is precisely what I wish to do, Mr. Alvord. I have discovered the devils who put that poor fellow into his coffin, and one of them is only waiting to tell the whole story, until I can fetch you before him. Will you go with me to hear it?"

"For me?" echoed Alvord, in amazement, not unmixed with suspicion. "Why should he be waiting for me? I know nothing about the job, and if you dare hint that I do, sir, I'll—"

"I know you have had nothing to do with committing the crime, Mr. Alvord, but you are, or ought to be, deeply interested in fetching the whole truth to light. You know the parties most deeply interested, and one of them has, if his admission can be relied upon, held rather intimate relations with your family."

The mine-owner gave a start at this, his face flushing redly.

"What! You mean that rascally Randall Keefe?"

"No, sir. I mean the cowardly whelp who did his level best to assassinate Randall Keefe! I mean the fellow you have known and associated with as Perry Clarkson."

Marcus Alvord seemed half stunned by this wholly unexpected revelation, but he rallied, and after a few more questions were asked and answered, the mine-owner consented to bear Detective Dickson company to where the once dandy gambler was held in safe-keeping until wanted for more active use.

Now that he had rallied from that shock, Marcus Alvord was himself again, and with

quiet significance he looked to his weapons before leaving the house with this stranger, coldly speaking:

"No doubt you are all right, Mr. Dickson, since I have your word for it; but, all the same, I'm not going to take any wild chances. If this is all a trick to nip me, for a stake, I'll take mighty good care you are the first one to catch the mineral: lead, be sure!"

Detective Dickson laughed softly, seeming amused rather than offended by that blunt speech. And then, arm in arm, the two men walked briskly away, heading toward the hills to the northeast.

While on their way, Dickson spoke with less disguise, and though the honest mine-owner could not bring himself to believe so much evil of men with whom he had held such intimate relations for many months past, he heard enough to betray little surprise when they were met at the mouth of a bush-masked cave, by one whom he instantly decided must be Old Halcyon.

"All correct here, mate?" asked Dickson.

"Everything lovely, sir, and he's growing impatient to have it over with. He don't exactly love the dark, seems like: breeds ugly sights, I reckon!"

"Well, it's pretty near time to put the finishing touches on. Go back, mate, and show a glimmer for the company, please."

The guard obeyed, and in rather less than another minute Marcus Alvord was gazing into the fear-blinded face of Perry Clarkson.

"Are you still of the same mind, Clarkson?" asked Dickson, gravely. "Are you willing to confess the whole scheme to this gentleman?"

"Will you swear, with Alvord as witness, to keep your promise to me, in case I make a voluntary confession, sir?" anxiously asked Perry.

"Just what was that promise, Clarkson?"

"To insure me against being lynched by the fellows of Sahara, when the whole truth leaks out. You did promise, sir, and now—"

"Wait: I promised nothing more than that, did I? I never said anything about letting you go free, or even trying to shield you from legal punishment?"

"No. But I'll take my chances on that. What kills me, is the thought of having a mob of men with whom I've associated for— Say you'll keep me from that, I beg of you!"

The oft-boasted nerve of the gambler had completely broken down, although he had long since learned that the grave had yielded up a living, instead of a dead man.

"I pledge you my word of honor, Clarkson, that you shall come to no harm through lynch-law," gravely assured Detective Dickson. "I merely wished to let Mr. Alvord see that there was nothing criminal in the bargain we had formed. Now—begin, please!"

"'Twas all set in motion, sir, by your having so much wealth," said Clarkson, glancing into that grave, shocked face, but then drooping his lids, unable to withstand that grieved gaze. "That was the start, but then I came to think much more of—of her!"

"I wouldn't dwell long on that particular point, Clarkson, if I were you," hinted Dickson, noting how Alvord shrunk at the word. "Just explain how and why the gang played their cards, please."

"To make a rich haul, of course," with a touch of sullen anger in his tones. "Alvord had more than any one man ought to possess: what with his ready cash, his developed mines, his promising claims, his stock in other sections, and—well, he had entirely too much, and we had just that much too little!"

"It'd take too long to explain just how we hatched it all up, but before we began playing our cards, we had the deck stocked to suit our tastes. And if some of us hadn't grown too infernally boggish, I do reckon we'd hold the ace, even yet!"

"Never mind crying over spilt soup, Clarkson," warned Detective Dickson. "Just bear in mind that time is passing, and there still remains much work to do before—well, a wink ought to be sufficient!"

Only with difficulty had Marcus Alvord held his fears in restraint so long, and now they came to the surface when he asked, huskily:

"One word, Clarkson: who were your associates in this scheme?"

"Mayor Illingsworth, for one, and Grace Crampton for another," the gambler promptly replied, with a touch of malice in his tones. "She was one of the first to plan how you might be bled the easiest."

Marcus Alvord shrunk perceptibly from this brutal blow, but he had in some measure been prepared for it by Detective Dickson, and manfully rallied, bearing all that followed as a true man ought.

"To boil it down, then, this was the scheme," added Clarkson, seeming to find ease in talking, now that he knew another was suffering from the truth. "Grace was to make sheep's eyes at Alvord. I was to honey around the young lady, his only child, so as to have a double string to our bow."

"In the first place, we agreed to catch-as-catch-could: the one who hooked a fish first, was to pass under the matrimonial yoke, as the



first step toward hauling in Alvord's millions. But then—well, I was a bit less evil than calculated, and then I held out for something different.

"Maybe you'll not give me credit for it, but I'm dealing straight, now. I fell in love with Miss Alvord, and if I could have done so without adding to her, and to your peril, sir, I'd have called the game off, right then and there!

"As it was, I said Grace should hang fire until I'd made my point. You'd ought to thank me for so much, at any rate, Mr. Alvord!"

He broke off, with a short bitter laugh, but as no one else spoke, he resumed:

"This is the way the gang had it planned, Alvord: when you were safely married to Grace, she was to see that you made a will in her favor, if possible. If not, then leaving your property in shares between her and your daughter."

"When this was done, you were to croak, by getting a double dose of the Indian poison which Grace met with when she was getting a whirl through the far East. She was—"

"Don't—not from her hand, man!" huskily protested the mine-owner.

"I'm sworn to tell the whole truth, sir, and that's an important part of it," asserted the gambler. "Sorry if it bites you so keenly, but—why should it, man?"

"I loved her! I thought her so pure, so good, so—and now!"

"You'd ought to be thanking me for giving you a dose that will cure, in place of killing," coolly added Clarkson. "The surest way to open your eyes is to make you see how diabolical the woman is."

"First, she was picked up out of the gutter, by me; she came from the slums, and has ever been, what her mother was before her, an adventuress all her life. She is evil to the very core!"

"To her, more than any other person, this section owes its curse of the Six Sinners—the Secret Six! Her cunning brain hatched up all the mystery which has surrounded their doings, although Hobart Illingsworth—no relative of hers, by the way—has figured as its head in all our sessions."

"It was Grace who—"

"Let that point pass, Clarkson," interrupted Detective Dickson. "And you, Mr. Alvord, are you satisfied that I was right in telling you Randall Keefe had naught to do with this black work?"

"Yes. I was wrong. I'll beg his pardon, but now—I'm sick and dizzy! I can't—"

Detective Dickson caught his staggering form in his arms, and then guided the sorely stricken mine-owner to the outer air.

He was not long in rallying, once away from that criminal, and after a few minutes in the warm rays of the sinking sun, he could listen intelligently to the earnest words of the Chicago Detective.

"I felt obliged to open your eyes to the bitter truth, sir, for I needed the help of just such a man as you. You know all Sabara, and can pick out the best citizens in it. Will you do that, and then assist me in the final exposure?"

## CHAPTER XXXVIII.

### THE SINNERS' LAST SESSION.

THANKS to the assistance lent him by Marcus Alvord, Detective Dickson held quite a little levee that same evening, at the house of the city mayor, Hobart Illingsworth.

It was a very select party, comprising only the best men of Sabara, for whose honor and integrity Marcus Alvord stood ready to vouch.

They were not a little puzzled by the affair, as their wondering faces betrayed, but Alvord had given each man earnest assurance that only the public good was sought, and their confidence in him as man and citizen enabled them to bear the suspense in outward seeming.

When all were finally congregated, Detective Dickson introduced himself for what he really was: an officer engaged in trailing down a most dangerous gang of law-breakers.

"You have long known of them under the title of the Six Sinners—the Secret Six—gentlemen, but I doubt if even one of you came anywhere near suspecting the truth: that the lawless league held forth in your very midst, and at least several of them were highly honored by you!"

"Names! Give their names!" came a cry which was almost general.

"I'll do even better than that, gentlemen, for I'll take you where you can see the Satanic Six in session—the last one they will ever hold in these parts, I'm more than pleased to assure you!"

With this brief introductory, Detective Dickson led the way to the cellar, and from thence along the same course we have seen him take on a prior occasion, pausing at the second door, to give the secret signal which, until then, had been held sacred to the use of the Six.

The alarm was answered, and Detective Dickson gave the regular password; only he pronounced it aloud, instead of in a guarded whis-

per, as all who had used it before were wont to do.

The secret door swung silently open, and with almost breathless interest the witnesses crowded into that low-ceiled, oddly-shaped apartment.

Upon the dais was seated the robed and cowl-ed figure of the Venerable Chief. Near the draped coffin was standing the Prosecutor. To the stake was bound a prisoner, ready for trial. Back of him, in a semicircle, were standing four other black-garbed shapes, just as they had stood when Derrick Mayfield was granted the use of his eyes on the night of his trial, save that each member was in irons, and bound to strong stakes set in the earthen floor.

"Here you behold the Six Sinners of Sabara, gentlemen, assembled in secret session," gravely spoke up Detective Dickson, with a wave of his hand calling attention to different figures. "It was here that Elmore Blakewood, then passing under the name of Derrick Mayfield, was put upon mock trial by this lawless gang."

"He was accused, judged, and executed! He was placed in yonder coffin, and while held helpless there, was forced to swallow a drug which doomed him to far worse than speedy death; which held him in a death-like trance for four-and-twenty hours, through each minute of which his brain alone remained alive!"

"Picture for yourselves what he must have suffered, gentlemen! He could realize all that was taking place around him, yet was unable to make even the slightest sign, to save himself, or denounce his cruel enemies! And all the while he knew he was to be buried alive! That he would rouse to life in a few hours, only to perish horribly of suffocation in his close coffin!"

A general mutter of fierce execration broke from the witnesses, and warned Dickson not to dwell too long on that point, else he might even yet be robbed of his triumph, through losing his prisoners by death!

"Fortunately I had met with another instance of the drug, and knew its peculiar properties. Acting on this knowledge, I helped bury the detective, taking opportunity to assure him, in a whisper, that he would be set free in ample time to preserve his life."

"I kept my word, as you can see for yourselves. Uncover, please, Mr. Blakewood!"

He who temporarily filled the office of "Prosecutor" at once drew off his sable cowl, revealing the face of the late buried detective.

Then he took up the story, briefly describing his trial, his punishment, after which he denounced the Satanic Six by name, beginning with Hobart Illingsworth as the Venerable Chief, following with Grace Crampton as Prosecutor, then naming Perry Clarkson, Jacob Gilmore, Harry Trefoil and Anthony Anderson, as the other members of the league.

As each name was pronounced, Detective Dickson removed cowl, and those accused were revealed to the wondering witnesses.

Clarkson was bound to the stake, and he repeated the confession he had already made, sparing no one, hiding nothing, laying bare every secret connected with the organization.

His confession included many crimes and outrages with which this story has nothing to do, but with which all of the representatives assembled there were concerned more or less closely, through losses caused by the Satanic gang.

When Clarkson had ended his confession, Detective Dickson again came to the front, and announcing himself as none other than the one who had figured as "Old Halcyon," explained why he had acted that particular part.

"I came here expressly to ferret out the Secret Six, and when I recognized Elmore Blakewood in the self-termed Derrick Mayfield, I did all I could to throw him off the right scent, so far as my real character was concerned. I feared to make myself known to him, lest he unwittingly betray me to my wary game."

"Now, gentlemen, I have ample proofs against each and all of these criminals. I can hang some of them, and send the rest to the Pen. I ask your assistance to get them safely out of town, before a mob can gather to lynch them: that surely will take place, unless we can keep the rest of Sabara in ignorance as to what we've discovered."

"Can I count upon your earnest co-operation in this, friends?"

There was but one reply: he could! And, to cut the story short, they proved as good as their word. Sabara never dreamed of that grand coup, until the Six Sinners were safely out of town, and far beyond the reach of Judge Lynch.

Perry Clarkson was turned over to Elmore Blakewood, who took him safely back to Detroit, where he was put on trial for the murder of Arthur Stanley Jones, the Chicago speculator. He was found guilty, on his own admission, and sentenced to imprisonment for life.

The others of the Secret Six met with their just dues: Hobart Illingsworth and Harry Trefoil were hanged. Jacob Gilmore and Tony Anderson were sent to the Penitentiary.

Grace Crampton, alias Illingsworth, was never brought to trial. She took poison, and died in frightful agony, despite all efforts to preserve her life.

Coming back to pleasanter scenes, Randall Keefe recovered from his wounds, all the sooner for being removed to Alvord's house, where Caroline, the better to nurse him, was quietly married to him while he was unable to even sit up in bed!

This was the reparation Marcus Alvord insisted on making, and neither of the lovers had any objection to raise, curiously enough!

"Old Halcyon" did not forget Circus Cook, but prevailed upon him to go back to Chicago, where he set him up in a snug little business, and the ex-gymnast never tires of talking over those lively days and still more lively nights, when there was a "Stranger Within the Gates!"

THE END.

## Beadle's Half-Dime Library.

BY CAPTAIN FRED. WHITTAKER.

- 15 The Sea-Cat; or, The Witch of Darien.
- 29 The Dumb Page; or, The Dog's Daughter.
- 43 Dick Darling, the Pony Express Rider.
- 150 Lance and Lasso; or, The Children of the Chaco.
- 154 The Sword Hunters; or, The Land of the Elephant Riders.
- 159 The Lost Captain; or, Skipper James Coffin's Cruise.
- 300 The Boy Hedonist; or, The Brothers of the Plumed Lance.
- 214 Wolfgang, the Robber of the Rhine.
- 249 Milo Homer, the Animal King; or, Round the World.
- 265 The Tiger Tamer; or, The League of the Jungle.
- 331 Black Nick, the Demon Rider.
- 395 California Joe's War Trail.

BY ARTHUR C. GRISSOM.

- 440 Little Foxfoot, the Gold Bow Kid.
- 558 The Sure-Shot Parde.
- 621 Truthful James, the "Pecoliar" Man.

BY CAPT. J. F. C. ADAMS.

- 34 Oregon Sol; or, Nick Whiffles's Boy Spy.
- 46 Glass-Eye, the Great Shot of the West.
- 54 Ned Hazel, the Boy Trapper.
- 56 Nick Whiffles's Pet; or, In the Valley of Death.
- 60 The White Indian; or, The Scout of the Yellowstone.
- 70 Old Zip's Cabin; or, The Greenhorn in the Woods.
- 81 Lightning Jo, the Terror of the Prairie.
- 85 Buck Buckram; or, Boss, the Female Trapper.
- 247 Old Grizzly and His Pets; or, The Wild Huntress.
- 251 Light-house Lige; or, Osceola, the Firebrand.
- 257 The Lost Hunters; or, The Underground Camp.
- 298 The Scalp King; or, The Human Thunderbolt.

BY FRANK DUMONT.

- 120 The Branded Hand; or, The Man of Mystery.
- 127 Wild-Fire, the Boss of the Road.
- 140 Blue Blaze; or, The Break of Day Boys of Rocky Bar.
- 171 Ebony Dan; or, The Rival Leagues.
- 185 Evil Eye; or, The Vultures of the Rio Grande.

BY ROGER STARBUCK.

- 25 The Boy Captain; or, The Pirate's Daughter.
- 114 The Black Schooner; or, Jib Junk, the Old Tar.
- 259 The Golden Harpoon; or, Lost Among the Floes.
- 348 Fire-Heels; or, Old Skinfint, the Death-Shadow.
- 354 Big Horn Ike, the Hill Tramp; or, The Odd Parde.
- 361 The Phantom Light-House.
- 370 Breaker Ben, the Reef-Runner.

BY HARRY ST. GEORGE.

- 30 Roaring Ralph Rockwood, the Ranger.
- 44 Rattling Rube; or, The Night Hawks of Kentucky.
- 59 Old Hickory; or, Pandey Ellie's Scalp.
- 108 Darling Davy; or, The Trail of the Border Wolf.
- 166 Hickory Harry; or, The Trapper-Brigade's Spy.
- 172 Thunderbolt Tom; or, the Wolf-Herder.

BY GEORGE WALDO BROWNE.

- 86 Dandy Rock, the Man from Texas.
- 90 The Dread Rider; or, The Texan Duellist.
- 99 The Tiger of Tacos; or, Dandy Rock's Angel.
- 115 The Mad Miner; or, Dandy Rock's Doom.
- 161 The Golden Hand; or, Dandy Rock to the Rescue.
- 164 Dandy Rock's Pledge; or, Hunted to Death.
- 173 Dandy Rock's Rival; or, The Haunted Maid of Tacos.

BY CHARLES E. LASALLE.

- 50 Burt Bunker, the Trapper.
- 52 The White Buffalo. A Tale of the Northwest.

BY FREDERICK DEWEY.

- 313 Cimarron Jack, the King-Pin of Ride-Shots.
- 478 Tangemund, the Desert Detective.
- 543 The Canyon Parde.

BY COLONEL DELLE SARA.

- 108 The Lion of the Sea; or, The Vailed Lady.
- 136 Cool Diamond; or, The Gambler's Big Game.

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- 107 One-Eyed Slim; or, The Abandoned Forest Home.
- 110 The Black Steed of the Prairies. A Story of Texas.

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- 278 The Three Trappers; or, The Mountain Monster.
- 282 Indian Joe; or, The White Spirit of the Hills.

BY W. J. HAMILTON.

- 63 The Red Brotherhood; or, The Twelve Avengers.
- 66 Single Hand; or, A Life for a Life.
- 72 Mad Tom Western, the Texan Ranger.
- 337 Ben Bird, the Cave King; or, Big Pete's Scoop.

BY HARRY HAZARD.

- 328 Arkansas Jack; or, The Scourge of the Mines.
- 329 Red-Skin Tom; or, The Demon's Trail.
- 343 The Mountain Devil; or, Yellow Jack, the Outlaw.

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650 Lucky Lester's Lone Hand.  
634 Old Handcart's Big Dump.  
622 The All Around Sports.  
603 Desert Alf, the Man With the Cougar.  
590 Gentle Jack, the High Roller from Humberg.  
578 Seven Shot Steve, the Sport with a Smile.  
568 The Dude Detective.  
558 Hurrah Harry, the High Horse from Halcyon.  
549 Belshazzar Brick, the Bailiff of Blue Blazes.  
533 Oregon, the Sport With a Scar.  
525 Fresh Frank, the Derringer Daisy.  
503 The Dude from Denver.  
478 Pinnacle Pete; or, The Fool from Way Back.  
459 Major Sunshine, the Man of Three Lives.  
429 Hair Trigger Tom of Red Bend.  
402 Snapshot Sam; or, The Angels' Flat Racket.  
396 The Piper Detective; or, The Gilt Edge Gang.  
375 Royal George, the Three in One.  
356 Three Handsome Sports; or, The Combination.  
344 Double Shot Dave of the Left Hand.  
333 Derringer Dick, the Man with the Drop.  
300 A Sport in Spectacles; or, Bad Time at Bunco.  
268 Magic Mike, the Man of Frills.  
229 Captain Cutsleeve; or, The Little Sport.  
214 The Two Cool Sports; or, Gertie of the Gulch.  
192 The Lightning Sport.  
182 Hands Up; or, The Knights of the Canyon.  
160 Soft Hand, Sharp; or, The Man with the Sand.  
145 Pistol Pards; or, The Silent Sport from Cinnabar.

## BY CAPT. FRED. WHITTAKER.

- 614 The Showman Detective; or, The Mad Magician.  
609 The Texas Tramp; or, Solid Saul.  
445 Journeyman John, the Champion.  
412 Larry Locke, the Man of Iron.  
406 Old Pop Hicks, Showman.  
378 John Armstrong, Mechanic.  
326 The Whitest Man in the Mines.  
310 The Marshal of Satanstown; or, The League.  
303 Top-Notch Tom, the Cowboy Outlaw.  
295 Old Cross-Eye, the Maverick-Hunter.  
290 The Lost Corvette; or, Blakeley's Last Cruise.  
284 The Three Frigates; or, Old Ironsides' Revenge.  
277 The Saucy Jane, Privateer.  
272 Seth Slocum, Railroad Surveyor.  
265 Old Double-Sword; or, Pilots and Pirates.  
253 A Yankee Cossack; or, The Queen of the Nihilists.  
247 Alligator Ike; or, The Secret of the Everglade.  
242 The Fog Devil; or, The Skipper of the Flash.  
230 The Flying Dutchman of 1880.  
226 The Mad Hussars; or, The O's and the Mac's.  
215 Parson Jim, King of the Cowboys.  
211 Colonel Plunger; or, The Unknown Sport.  
206 One Eye, the Cannoneer.  
193 The Man in Red; or, The Ghost of the Old Guard.  
187 The Death's Head Cuirassiers.  
174 The Phantom Knights.  
159 Red Rudiger, the Archer.  
132 Nemo, King of the Tramps.  
115 The Severed Head; or, The Castle Coucy Secret.  
108 The Duke of Diamonds.  
98 The Rock Rider; or, The Spirit of the Sierra.  
96 Double Death; or, The Spy of Wyoming.  
69 The Irish Captain. A Tale of Fontenoy.  
65 The Red Rajah; or, The Scourge of the Indies.  
39 The Russian Spy; or, The Starry Cross Brothers.

## BY OLL COOMES.

- 619 Kit Bandy & Co, the Border Detectives.  
148 One-Armed Alf, the Giant Hunter.  
137 Long Beard, the Giant Spy.  
99 The Giant Rifleman; or, Wild Camp Life.  
51 Red Rob, the Boy Road-Agent.  
48 Idaho Tom, the Young Outlaw of Silverland.  
46 Bowie-Knife Ben, the Nor'west Hunter.  
44 Old Dan Rackback, the Great Extarminator.  
43 Dakota Dan, the Reckless Ranger.  
7 Death-Notch, the Destroyer.

## BY PHILIP S. WARNE.

- 593 Captain Adair, the Cattle King.  
567 Captain Midnight, the Man of Craft.  
544 The Back to Back Pards.  
522 The Champion Three.  
502 Bareback Buck, the Centaur of the Plains.  
472 Six Foot Si; or, The Man to "Tie To."  
431 California Kit, the Always on Hand.  
404 Silver Sid; or, A "Daisy" Bluff.  
380 Tiger Dick's Pledge; or, The Golden Serpent.  
359 Yellow Jack, the Mestizo.  
338 Jack Sands, the Boss of the Town.  
299 Three of a Kind; or, Dick, Despard and the Sport.  
290 Tiger Dick's Lone Hand.  
251 Tiger Dick vs. Iron Despard.  
207 Old Hard Head; or, Whirlwind and his Mare.  
171 Tiger Dick, the Man of the Iron Heart.  
114 The Gentleman from Pike.  
80 A Man of Nerve; or, Caliban the Dwarf.  
54 Always on Hand; or, The Foot-Hills Sport.  
29 Tiger Dick, Faro King; or, The Cashier's Crime.  
4 The Kidnapper; or, The Northwest Shanghai.  
1 A Hard Crowd; or, Gentleman Sam's Sister.

## BY LEON LEWIS.

- 699 The Cowboy Couriers.  
686 The On-the-Wing Detectives.  
624 The Submarine Detective; or, The Water Ghouls.  
484 Captain Ready, the Red Ransomer.  
481 The Silent Detective; or, The Bogus Nephew.  
456 The Demon Steer.  
428 The Flying Glim; or, The Island Lure.

## BY PROF. J. H. INGRAHAM.

- 316 Lafitte's Lieutenant; or, Child of the Sea.  
314 Lafitte; or, The Pirate of the Gulf.  
118 The Burglar Captain; or, The Fallen Star.  
113 The Sea Skipper; or, The Freebooters.

## BY DR. NOEL DUNBAR.

- 604 The Detective in Rags; or, The Grim Shadower.  
500 The True-Heart Pards.

## BY CAPTAIN HOWARD HOLMES.

- 711 Dan Damon, the Gilt-Edge Detective.  
701 Silver Steve, the Branded Sport.  
694 Gideon Grip, the Secret Shadower.  
684 Velvet Van, the Mystery Shadower.  
673 The Dude Desperado.  
671 Jason Clew, the Silk-Handed Ferret.  
664 Monk Morel, the Man-Hun er.  
654 Sol Sphinx, the Ferret Detective.  
642 Red Pard and Yellow.  
608 Silent Sam, the Shadow Sphinx.  
592 Captain Sid, the Shasta Ferret.  
579 Old Cormorant, the Bowery Shadow.  
569 Captain Cobra, the Hooded Mystery.  
559 Danton, the Shadow Sharp.  
550 Silk Hand, the Mohave Ferret.  
543 The Magnate Detective.  
532 Jack Javert, the Independent Detective.  
523 Reynard of Red Jack; or, The Lost Detective.  
512 Captain Velvet's Big Stake.  
505 Phil Fox, the Genteele Spotter.  
496 Richard Redfire, the Two Worlds' Detective.  
487 Sunshine Sam, a Chip of the Old Block.  
480 Hawkspear, the Man with a Secret.  
468 Coldgrip in Deadwood.  
460 Captain Coldgrip, the Detective.  
453 Captain Coldgrip's Long Trail.  
447 Volcano, the Frisco Spy.  
441 The California Sharp.  
434 Lucifer Lynx, the Wonder Detective.  
421 Father Ferret, the Frisco Shadow.  
413 Captain Coldgrip in New York.  
407 Captain Coldgrip's Nerve; or, Injun Nick.  
400 Captain Coldgrip; or, The New York Spotter.  
392 The Lost Bonanza; or, The Boot of Silent Hound.  
382 The Bonanza Band; or, Dread Don of Cool Clan.  
374 Major Blister, the Sport of Two Cities.  
365 Keen Kennard, the Shasta Shadow.  
352 The Desperate Dozen.  
347 Denver Duke, the Man with "Sand."  
340 Cool Conrad, the Dakota Detective.  
335 Flash Dan, the Nabob; or, Blades of Bowie Bar.  
321 California Claude, the Lone Bandit.  
294 Broadcloth Burt, the Denver Dandy.  
278 Hercules Goldspur, the Man of the Velvet Hand.

## BY WM. G. PATTEN.

- 715 Double-Voice Dan on Deck.  
702 Double-Voice Dan, the Always-on-Deck Detective.  
696 Double-Voice Dan, the Go-it Alone Detective.  
689 The Sparkler Sharp.  
676 Hurricane Hal, the Cowboy Hotspur.  
669 Old True Blue, the Trusty.  
663 The Giant Sport; or, Sold to Satan.  
656 Old Pug Ugly, the Rough and Ready.  
648 Gold Glove Gid, the Man of Grit.  
641 Aztec Jack, the Desert Nomad.  
631 Colonel Cool, the Santa Fe Sharp.  
602 Captain Nameless, the Mountain Mystery.  
571 Old Dismal, the Range Detective.  
545 Hustler Harry, the Cowboy Sport.

## BY CAPTAIN MARK WILTON.

- 323 Hotspur Hugh; or, The Banded Brothers.  
311 Heavy Hand; or, The Marked Men.  
305 Silver-Plated Sol, the Montana Rover.  
291 Horseshoe Hank, the Man of Big Luck.  
285 Lightning Bolt, the Canyon Terror.  
276 Texa; Chick, the Southwest Detective.  
271 Stonefist, of Big Nugget Bend.  
266 Leopard Luke, the King of Horse-Thieves.  
263 Iron-Armed Abe, the Hunchback Destroyer.  
258 Bullet Head, the Colorado Bravo.  
245 Barranca Bill, the Revolver Champion.  
237 Long-Haired Max; or, The Black League.  
227 Buckshot Ben, the Man-Hunter of Idaho.  
223 Canyon Dave, the Man of the Mountain.  
219 The Scorpion Brothers; or, Mad Tom's Mission.  
202 Cactus Jack, the Giant Guide.  
194 Don Sombrero, the California Road Gent.  
176 Lady Jaguar, the Robber Queen.

## BY SAM S. HALL—"Buckskin Sam."

- 511 Paint Pete, the Prairie Patrol.  
371 Gold Buttons; or, The Up Range Pards.  
358 The Prince of Pan Out.  
342 Blanco Bill, the Mustang Monarch.  
323 King Kent; or, The Bandits of the Basin.  
322 The Crimson Coyotes; or, Nita, the Nemesis.  
309 Raybold, the Rattling Ranger.  
301 Bowlder Bill; or, The Man from Taos.  
293 Stampede Steve; or, The Doom of the Double.  
287 Dandy Dave and his Horse, White Stocking.  
282 The Merciless Marauders; or, Carl's Revenge.  
273 Mountain Mose, the Gorge Outlaw.  
269 The Bayou Bravo; or, The Terrible Trail.  
264 The Crooked Three.  
256 Double Dan, the Dastard; or, The Pirates.  
250 The Rough Riders; or, Sharp Eye, the Scourge.  
244 Merciless Mart, the Man Tiger of Missouri.  
239 The Terrible Trio; or, The Angel of the Army.  
225 Rocky Mountain Al; or, The Waif of the Range.  
221 Desperate Duke, the Guadalupe "Galoot."  
217 The Serpent of El Paso; or, Frontier Frank.  
212 The Brazos Tigers; or, The Minute Men.  
204 Big Foot Wallace, the King of the Lariat.  
199 Diamond Dick, the Dandy from Denver.  
195 The Lone Star Gambler; or, Magnolia's Maid.  
191 The Terrible Tonkaway; or, Old Rocky's Pards.  
186 The Black Bravo; or, The Tonkaway's Triumph.  
173 Dark Dashwood, the Desperate.  
90 Wild Will, the Mad Ranchero.  
3 Kit Carson, Jr., the Crack Shot.

## BY COL. THOMAS H. MONSTERY.

- 322 Spring-Heel Jack; or, The Masked Mystery.  
262 Fighting Tom, the Terror of the Troughs.  
236 Champion Sam; or, The Monarchs of the Show.  
169 Corporal Cannon, the Man of Forty Duels.  
157 Mourad, the Mameluke; or, The Three Sword masters.  
150 El Rubio Bravo, King of the Swordsmen.  
143 The Czar's Spy; or, The Nihilist League.  
126 The Demon Duelist; or, The League of Steel.  
82 Iron Wrist, the Swordmaster.

## BY NED BUNTLINE.

- 657 Long Tom, the Privateer.  
633 The Sea Spy.  
621 The Red Privateer; or, The Midshipman Rover.  
584 Fire Feather, the Buccaneer King.  
517 Buffalo Bill's First Trail.  
361 Tombstone Dick, the Train Pilot.  
270 Andros, the Rover; or, The Pirate's Daughter.  
122 Saul Sabberday, the Idiot Spy.  
111 The Smuggler Captain; or, The Skipper's Crime.  
61 Captain Seawaif, the Privateer.  
23 The Red Warrior; or, The Comanche Lover.  
18 The Sea Bandit; or, The Queen of the Isle.  
16 The White Wizard; or, The Seminole Prophet.  
14 Thayendanegea, the Scourge; or, The War-Eagle.

## BY EDWARD WILLETT.

- 483 Flush Fred, the River Sharp.  
368 The Canyon King; or, a Price on his Head.  
348 Dan Dillon, King of Crosscut.  
337 Old Gabe, the Mountain Tramp.  
327 Terrapin Dick, the Wildwood Detective.  
315 Flush Fred's Double; or, The Squatters' League.  
308 Hemlock Hank, Tough and True.  
298 Logger Lem; or, Life in the Pine Woods.  
289 Flush Fred's Full Hand.  
274 Flush Fred, the Mississippi Sport.  
248 Montana Nat, the Lion of Last Chance Camp.  
223 Bill the Blizzard; or, Red Jack's Crime.  
209 Buck Farley, the Bonanza Prince.  
129 Mississippi Mose; or, a Strong Man's Sacrifice.

## BY CAPTAIN MAYNE REID.

- 267 The White Squaw.  
234 The Hunter's Feast.  
228 The Maroon. A Tale of Voodoo and Obeah.  
213 The Wild Huntress; or, The Squatter.  
213 The War Trail; or, The Hunt of the Wild Horse.  
208 The White Chief. A Romance of Mexico.  
200 The Rifle Rangers; or, Adventures in Mexico.  
74 The Captain of the Rifles; or, The Lake Queen.  
66 The Specter Barque. A Tale of the Pacific.  
55 The Scalp Hunters. A Romance of the Plains.  
12 The Death-Shot; or, Tracked to Death.  
8 The Headless Horseman.

## BY HAROLD PAYNE.

- 713 Detective Burr's Spirit Chase.  
706 Detective Burr's Seven Clues.  
698 Thad Burr, the Invincible.  
690 The Matchless Detective.  
680 XX, the Fatal Claw.

## BY COLONEL DELLE SARA.

- 106 Shamus O'Brien, the Bould Boy of Glingal.  
87 The Scarlet Captain; or, Prisoner of the Tower.  
53 Silver Sam; or, The Mystery of Deadwood City.

## BY JACKSON KNOX—"Old Hawk."

- 643 Castlemaine, the Silent Sifter.  
616 Magnus, the Weird Detective.  
606 The Drop Detective.  
595 Wellborn, the Upper Crust Detective.  
582 Joram, the Detective Expert.  
574 Old Falcon's Double.  
561 The Thug King; or, The Falcon Detective's Foe.  
548 Falconbridge, the Sphinx Detective.  
536 Old Falcon's Foe; or, The Detective's Swell Job.  
515 Short-Stop Maje, the Diamond Field Detective.  
509 Old Falcon, the Thunderbolt Detective.  
501 Springsteel Steve, the Retired Detective.  
494 The Detective's Spy.  
485 Rowlock, the Harbor Detective.  
477 Dead-arm Brandt.  
467 Mainwaring, the Salamander.  
462 The Circus Detective.  
451 Griplock, the Rocket Detective.  
444 The Magic Detective; or, The Hidden Hand.  
424 Hawk Heron's Deputy.  
386 Hawk Heron, the Falcon Detective.

## MISCELLANEOUS.

- 566 The Dauntless Detective; or, The Daughter Avenger. By Tom W. King.  
542 The Ocean Drift; or, The Fight for Two Lives. By A. F. Holt.  
534 Green Mountain Joe; or, The Counterfeiter's Cave. By Marmaduke Dey.  
518 Royal Richard, the Thoroughbred. By J. W. Osborn.  
410 Sarah Brown, Detective. By K. F. Hill.  
366 The Telegraph Detective. By George H. Morse.  
353 Bart Brennan; or, The King of Straight Flush. By John Cuthbert.  
350 Flash Falcon, Society Detective. By W. J. Cobb.  
312 Kinkfoot Karl, the Mountain Scourge. By Morris Redwing.  
275 The Smuggler Cutter. By J. D. Conroy.  
261 Black Sam, the Prairie Thunderbolt. By Col. Jo Yards.  
190 The Three Guardsmen. By Alexander Dumas.  
179 Conrad, the Convict. By Prof. Gildersleeve.  
166 Owlet, the Robber Prince. By S. R. Urban.  
153 The Doomed Dozen. By Dr. Frank Powell.  
152 Captain Ironnerve, the Counterfeiter Chief.  
146 The Doctor Detective. By George Lemuel.  
144 The Hunchback of Notre Dame. By Victor Hugo.  
140 The Three Spaniards. By Geo. Walker.  
133 Rody the Rover. By William Carleton.  
125 The Blacksmith Outlaw. By H. Ainsworth.  
110 The Silent Rifleman. By H. W. Herbert.  
102 The Masked Band. By George L. Aiken.  
78 The Mysterious Spy. By Arthur M. Grainger.  
76 The Queen's Musketeers. By George Albany.  
68 The Fighting Trapper. By Capt. J. F. C. Adams.  
60 Wide Awake, the Robber King. By F. Dumont.  
32 B'hoys of Yale; or, The Scrapes of Collegians.  
11 Midshipman Easy. By Captain Marryatt.  
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675 Steel Surry, the Sport from Sunrise.  
668 Solemn Saul's Luck Struck.  
661 The Get-There Sharp.  
651 Silvertip Steve, the Sky Scraper from Siskiyou.  
645 Gopher Gabe, the Unseen Detective.  
636 Dandy Darling, Detective.  
627 Mossback Mose, the Mountaineer.  
617 The Grip Sack Sharp's Even up.  
597 Big Bandy, the Brigadier of Brimstone Butte.  
588 Sandy Sands, the Sharp from Snap City.  
576 Silver-Tongued Sid; or, Grip Sack Sharp's Sweep.  
564 The Grip Sack Sharp; or, The Seraphs of Sodom.  
555 Grip-Sack Sid, the Sample Sport.  
547 The Buried Detective; or, Saul's Six Sensations.  
541 Major Magnet, the Man of Nerve.  
535 Dandy Dutch, the Decorator from Dead-Lift.  
527 Dandy Andy, the Diamond Detective.  
514 Gabe Gunn, the Grizzly from Ginseng.  
504 Solemn Saul, the Sad Man from San Saba.  
495 Rattlepate Rob; or, The Roundhead's Reprisal.  
488 The Thoroughbred Sport.  
474 Daddy Dead-Eye, the Despot of Dew Drop.  
466 Old Rough and Ready, the Sage of Sundown.  
458 Dutch Dan, the Pilgrim from Spitzenberg.  
450 The Rustler Detective.  
443 A Cool Hand; or, Pistol Johnny's Picnic.  
438 Oklahoma Nick.  
433 Laughing Leo; or, Sam's Dandy Pard.  
426 The Ghost Detective; or, The Secret Service Spy.  
416 Monte Jim, the Black Sheep of Bismarck.  
409 Rob Roy Ranch; or, The Imps of Pan Handle.  
403 The Nameless Sport.  
395 Deadly Aim, the Duke of Derringers.  
387 Dark Durg, the Ishmael of the Hills.  
379 Howling Jonathan, the Terror from Headwaters.  
372 Captain Crisp, the Man with a Record.  
367 A Royal Flush; or, Dan Brown's Big Game.  
360 Jumping Jerry, the Gamecock from Sundown.  
355 Stormy Steve, the Mad Athlete.  
351 Nor' West Nick, the Border Detective.  
345 Masked Mark, the Mounted Detective.  
339 Spread Eagle Sam, the Hercules Hide Hunter.  
331 Chispa Charley, the Gold Nugget Sport.  
324 Old Forked Lightning, the Solitary.  
317 Frank Lightfoot, the Miner Detective.  
302 Faro Saul, the Handsome Hercules.  
292 Moke Horner, the Boss Roustabout.  
286 Pistol Johnny; or, One Man in a Thousand.  
283 Sleek Sam, the Devil of the Mines.  
257 Death Trap Diggings; or, A Man Way Back.  
249 Elephant Tom, of Durango.  
241 Spitfire Saul, King of the Rustlers.  
233 The Old Boy of Tombstone.  
201 Pirate of the Placers; or, Joaquin's Death Hunt.  
197 Revolver Rob; or, The Belle of Nugget Camp.  
180 Old '49; or, The Amazon of Arizona.  
170 Sweet William, the Trapper Detective.  
165 Joaquin, the Terrible.  
154 Joaquin, the Saddle King.  
141 Equinox Tom, the Bully of Red Rock.  
127 Sol Scott, the Masked Miner.  
119 Alabama Joe; or, The Yazo Man-Hunters.  
105 Dan Brown of Denver; or, The Detective.  
88 Big George; or, The Five Outlaw Brothers.  
71 Captain Cool Blade; or, Mississippi Man Shark.  
67 The Boy Jockey; or, Honesty vs. Crookedness.  
64 Double-Sight, the Death Shot.  
50 Jack Rabbit, the Prairie Sport.  
47 Pacific Pete, the Prince of the Revolver.  
45 Old Bull-Eye, the Lightning Shot.  
40 Long-Haired Pards; or, The Tartars of the Plains.  
30 Gospel George; or, Fiery Fred, the Outlaw.  
28 Three-Fingered Jack, the Road-Agent.

## BY WILLIAM H. MANNING.

- 714 Gabe Gall, the Gambler from Great Hump.  
703 Spokane Saul, the Samaritan Suspect.  
692 Dead-Shot Paul, the Deep-Range Explorer.  
655 Strawberry Sam, the Man with the Birthmark.  
646 Dark John, the Grim Guard.  
638 Murdock, the Dread Detective.  
623 Dangerous Dave, the Never-Beaten Detective.  
611 Alkali Abe, the Game Chicken from Texas.  
596 Rustler Rube; the Round-Up Detective.  
585 Dan Dixon's Double.  
575 Steady Hand, the Napoleon of Detectives.  
563 Wyoming Zeke, the Hotspur of Honeysuckle.  
551 Garry Kean, the Man with Backbone.  
539 Old Doubledark, the Wily Detective.  
531 Saddle-Chief Kit, the Prairie Centaur.  
521 Paradise Sam, the Nor'-West Pilot.  
513 Texas Tartar, the Man With Nine Lives.  
506 Uncle Honest, the Peacemaker of Hornets' Nest.  
498 Central Pacific Paul, the Mail Train Spy.  
492 Border Bullet, the Prairie Sharpshooter.  
486 Kansas Kitten, the Northwest Detective.  
479 Gladiator Gabe, the Samson of Sassajack.  
470 The Duke of Dakota.  
463 Gold Gauntlet, the Gulch Gladiator.  
455 Yank Yellowbird, the Tall Hustler of the Hills.  
449 Bluff Burke, King of the Rockies.  
442 Wild West Walt, the Mountain Veteran.  
437 Deep Duke; or, The Man of Two Lives.  
427 The Rivals of Montana Mill.  
415 Hot Heart, the Detective Spy.  
405 Old Baldy, the Brigadier of Buck Basin.  
385 Will Dick Turpin, the Leadville Lion.  
297 Colorado Rube, the Strong Arm of Hotspur.  
279 The Gold Dragoon, or, California Bloodhound.

## BY LIEUT. A. K. SIMS.

- 709 Lodestone Lem, the Champion of Chestnut Burr.  
695 Singer Sam, the Pilgrim Detective.  
688 The River Rustlers.  
673 Stuttering Sam, the Whitest Sport of Santa Fe.  
666 Old Adamant, the Man of Rock.  
618 Kansas Karl, the Detective King.  
552 Prince Primrose, the Flower of the Flock.  
526 Huckleberry, the Foot-Hills Detective.

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- 704 Invisible Ivan, the Wizard Detective.  
685 The Red-skin Sea Rover.  
679 Revello, the Pirate Cruiser; or, The Rival Rovers.  
672 The Red Rapier; or, The Sea Rover's Bride.  
662 The Jew Detective; or, The Beautiful Convict.  
658 The Cowboy Clan; or, The Tigress of Texas.  
653 The Lasso King's League. A companion Story to "Buck Taylor, the Saddle King."  
640 The Rover's Retribution.  
635 The Ex Buccaneer; or, The Stigma of Sin.  
630 The Sea Thief.  
625 Red Wings; or, The Gold Seekers of the Bahamas.  
615 The Three Buccaneers.  
610 The Red Flag Rover; or, White Wings of the Deep.  
605 The Shadow Silver Ship.  
600 The Silver Ship; or, The Sea Scouts of '76.  
593 The Sea Rebel; or, Red Rovers of the Revolution.  
587 Conrad, the Sailor Spy; or, True Hearts of '76.  
581 The Outlawed Skipper; or, The Gantlet Runner.  
560 The Man from Mexico.  
553 Mark Monte, the Mutineer; or, The Branded Brig.  
546 The Doomed Whaler; or, The Life Wreck.  
540 The Fleet Scourge; or, The Sea Wings of Salem.  
530 The Savages of the Sea.  
524 The Sea Chaser; or, The Pirate Noble.  
516 Chatard, the Dead-Shot Duelist.  
510 El Moro, the Corsair Commodore.  
493 The Scouts of the Sea.  
489 The Pirate Hunter; or, The Ocean Rivals.  
482 Ocean Tramps; or, The Desperadoes of the Deep.  
476 Bob Brent, the Buccaneer; or, The Red Sea Raider.  
469 The Lieutenant Detective; or, The Fugitive Sailor.  
457 The Sea Insurgent; or, The Conspirator Son.  
446 Ocean Ogre, the Outcast Corsair.  
435 The One-Armed Buccaneer.  
430 The Fatal Frigate; or, Rivals in Love and War.  
425 The Sea Sword; or, The Ocean Rivals.  
418 The Sea Siren; or, The Fugitive Privateer.  
399 The New Monte Cristo.  
393 The Convict Captain.  
388 The Giant Buccaneer; or, The Wrecker Witch.  
377 Afloat and Ashore; or, The Corsair Conspirator.  
373 Sailor of Fortune; or, The Barnegat Buccaneer.  
369 The Coast Corsair; or, The Siren of the Sea.  
364 The Sea Fugitive; or, The Queen of the Coast.  
346 Ocean Guerrillas; or, Phantom Midshipman.  
341 The Sea Desperado.  
336 The Magic Ship; or, Sandy Hook Freebooters.  
325 The Gentleman Pirate; or, The Casco Hermits.  
318 The Indian Buccaneer; or, The Red Rovers.  
307 The Phantom Pirate; or, The Water Wolves.  
281 The Sea Owl; or, The Lady Captain of the Gulf.  
259 Cutlass and Cross; or, the Ghouls of the Sea.  
255 The Pirate Priest; or, The Gambler's Daughter.  
246 Queen Helen, the Amazon of the Overland.  
235 Red Lightning the Man of Chance.  
231 The Kid Glove Miner; or, The Magic Doctor.  
224 Black Beard, the Buccaneer.  
220 The Specter Yacht; or, A Brother's Crime.  
216 The Corsair Planter; or, Driven to Doom.  
210 Buccaneer Bess, the Lioness of the Sea.  
205 The Gambler Pirate; or, Lady of the Lagoon.  
198 The Skeleton Schooner; or, The Skimmer.  
184 The Ocean Vampire; or, The Castle Heiress.  
181 The Scarlet Schooner; or, The Sea Nemesis.  
177 Don Diablo, the Planter-Corsair.  
172 Black Pirate; or, The Golden Fetters Mystery.  
162 The Mad Mariner; or, Dishonored and Disowned.  
155 The Corsair Queen; or, The Gypsies of the Sea.  
147 Gold Spur, the Gentleman from Texas.  
139 Fire Eye; or, The Bride of a Buccaneer.  
134 Darkey Dan, the Colored Detective.  
131 Buckskin Sam, the Texas Trailer.  
128 The Chevalier Corsair; or, The Heritage.  
121 The Sea Cadet; or, The Rover of the Rigoletts.  
116 Black Plume; or, The Sorceress of Hell Gate.  
109 Captain Kyd, the King of the Black Flag.  
104 Montezuma, the Merciless.  
103 Merle, the Mutineer; or, The Red Anchor Brand.  
94 Freelance, the Buccaneer.  
89 The Pirate Prince; or, The Queen of the Isle.  
85 The Cretan Rover; or, Zuleikah the Beautiful.  
2 The Dare Devil; or, The Winged Sea Witch.

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Numbers \* are from the pen of Buffalo Bill.

- 710 Buffalo Bill Baffled.  
697 Buffalo Bill's Buckskin Brotherhood.  
691 Buffalo Bill's Blind Trail.  
682 Buffalo Bill's Secret Service Trail.  
667 Buffalo Bill's Swoop; or, The King of the Mines.  
649 Buck Taylor, the Saddle King.  
644 Buffalo Bill's Bonanza.  
\*639 The Gold King; or, Montebello, the Magnificent.  
629 Daredeath Dick; or, Buffalo Bill's Daring Role.  
\*599 The Dead Shot Nine; or, My Pards of the Plains.  
517 Buffalo Bill's First Trail.  
\*414 Red Renard, the Indian Detective.  
\*401 One-Armed Pard; or, Borderland Retribution.  
\*397 The Wizard Brothers; or, White Beaver's Trail.  
\*394 White Beaver, the Exile of the Platte.  
362 Buffalo Bill's Grip; or, Oath Bound to Custer.  
329 The League of Three; or, Buffalo Bill's Pledge.  
\*319 Wild Bill, the Whirlwind of the West.  
\*304 Texas Jack, the Prairie Rattler.  
\*243 The Pilgrim Sharp; or, The Soldier's Sweetheart.  
189 Wild Bill's Gold Trail; or, The Desperate Dozen.  
175 Wild Bill's Trump Card; or, The Indian Heiress.  
168 Wild Bill, the Pistol Dead Shot.  
158 The Doomed Dozen; or, Buffalo Bill, Chief of Scouts.  
117 Buffalo Bill's Strange Pard.  
92 Buffalo Bill, the Buckskin King.  
\*83 Gold Bullet Sport; or, Knights of the Overland.  
\*52 Death-Trailer, the Chief of Scouts.

## BY MAJOR DANGERFIELD BURR.

- 448 Hank Kenton, the Traitor.  
188 The Phantom Mazeppa; or, The Hyena.  
156 Velvet Face, the Border Bravo.  
142 Captain Crimson, the Man of the Iron Face.  
117 Dashing Dandy; or, The Hotspur of the Hills.  
92 Buffalo Bill, the Buckskin King.

## BY ALBERT W. AIKEN.

- 708 Joe Phenix's Siren.  
700 Joe Phenix's Unknown.  
681 Joe Phenix's Specials.  
674 Uncle Sun Up, the Born Detective.  
670 The Lightweight Detective.  
665 The Frisco Detective; or, The Golden Gate Find.  
660 The Fresh in Montana.  
652 Jackson Blake, the Bouncer Detective.  
647 The Fresh of Frisco at Santa Fe.  
637 Joe Phenix in Crazy Camp.  
632 Joe Phenix's Master Search.  
628 Joe Phenix's Combin'.  
620 Joe Phenix's Silent Six.  
613 Keen Billy, the Sport.  
607 Old Benzine, the "Hard Case" Detective.  
601 Joe Phenix's Shadow.  
594 Fire Face, the Silver King's Foe.  
586 The Silver Sharp Detective.  
577 Tom of California.  
570 The Actress Detective; or, The Invisible Hand.  
562 Lone Hand, the Shadow.  
556 Fresh, the Sport-Chevalier.  
537 Blake, the Mountain Lion.  
529 The Fresh in New York.  
520 The Lone Hand on the Caddo.  
497 The Fresh in Texas.  
490 The Lone Hand in Texas.  
475 Chin Chin, the Chinese Detective.  
465 The Actor Detective.  
461 The Fresh on the Rio Grande.  
440 The High Horse of the Pacific.  
423 The Lone Hand; or, The Red River Recreants.  
419 The Bat of the Battery; or, Joe Phenix, Detective.  
408 Doc Grip, the Vendetta of Death.  
391 Kate Scott, the Decoy Detective.  
384 Injun Dick, Detective; or, Tracked to New York.  
381 The Gypsy Gentleman; or, Nick Fox, Detective.  
376 Black Beards; or, The Rio Grande High Horse.  
370 The Dusky Detective; or, Pursued to the End.  
363 Crowningshield, the Detective.  
354 Red Richard; or, The Crimson Cross Brand.  
349 Iron-Hearted Dick, the Gentleman Road-Agent.  
320 The Gentle Spotter; or, The N. Y. Night Hawk.  
252 The Wall Street Blood; or, The Telegraph Girl.  
203 The Double Detective; or, The Midnight Mystery.  
196 La Marmoset, the Detective Queen.  
173 California John, the Pacific Thoroughbred.  
161 The Wolves of New York; or, Joe Phenix's Hunt.  
130 Captain Voicano, or, The Man of Red Revolvers.  
112 Joe Phenix, Private Detective.  
107 Richard Talbot, of Cinnabar.  
101 The Man from New York.  
97 Bronze Jack, the California Thoroughbred.  
93 Captain Dick Talbot, King of the Road.  
91 The Winning Oar; or, The Innkeeper's Daughter.  
84 Hunted Down; or, The League of Three.  
81 The Human Tiger; or, A Heart of Fire.  
79 Joe Phenix, the Police Spy.  
77 The Fresh of Frisco; or, The Heiress.  
75 Gentleman George; or, Parlor, Prison and Street.  
72 The Phantom Hand; or, The 5th Avenue Heiress.  
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59 The Man from Texas; or, The Arkansas Outlaw.  
56 The Indian Mazeppa; or, Madman of the Plains.  
49 The Wolf Demon; or, The Kanawha Queen.  
42 The California Detective; or, The Witches of N.Y.  
41 Gold Dan; or, The White Savage of Salt Lake.  
38 Velvet Hand; or, Injun Dick's Iron Grip.  
36 Injun Dick; or, The Death Shot of Shasta.  
35 Kentuck, the Sport; or, Dick Talbot of the Mines.  
34 Rocky Mountain Rob, the California Outlaw.  
33 Overland Kit; or, The Idyl of White Pine.  
31 The New York Sharp; or, The Flash of Lightning.  
27 The Spotter Detective; or, Girls of New York.

## BY J. C. COWDRICK.

- 626 Ducats Dion, the Nabob Sport Detective.  
612 Sheriff Stillwood, the Regulator of Raspberry.  
598 The Dominie Detective.  
591 Duke Daniels, the Society Detective.  
580 Shadowing a Shadow.  
565 Prince Paul, the Postman Detective.  
557 The Mountain Graybeards; or, Riddles' Riddle.  
519 Old Riddles, the Rocky Ranger.  
499 Twilight Charlie, the Road Sport.  
473 Gilbert of Gotham, the Steel-arm Detective.  
452 Rainbow Rob, the Tulp from Texas.  
436 Kentucky Jean, the Sport from Yellow Pine.  
422 Blue Grass Burt, the Gold Star Detective.  
390 The Giant Cupid; or, Cibuta John's Jubilee.

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